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CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 4

Treyarch's Blackout Joins The Battle Royale

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The Battle Royale Of Battle Royale Games

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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@GI_AndyMc

Battle Royale, a cult classic film about a group of students who must fight to the death, is the blueprint for today's modern games and a sea of entertainment media dubbed after the movie's title. You would have to live under a rock to have not heard about gaming's obsession with the simple and alluring premise – kill or be killed until there is a only one player or team left to bask in victory.

The play style appeared in numerous games long before PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Fortnite made it a global phenomenon, but only now are the long-established players in the shooter space joining the fray. First up is Call of Duty with Blackout, our cover story this month. Battlefield V will also add a battle royale mode sometime after the game releases later this year. While other established players like Halo have insinuated they have no interest in the genre, more brands and publishers will surely follow, as there is no denying the genre's success.

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, which deserves a lot of credit for the rise and success of the genre, isn't going to take all of this lying down. It shouldn't, either, considering Call of Duty and Battlefield share its basis in realism and find themselves in more direct conflict than the whimsical worlds of Fortnite or Realm Royale.

The battle royale craze may not be for everyone, but there is no denying that the genre is currently a global sensation with no end in sight. The battle for battle royale supremacy is real, and with plenty of games trying to invade the space, just like the genre's namesake, several games will fail to grab that victory royale or chicken dinner.

I for one can't wait to watch the battle to come because, love it or leave it, you can't ignore the influence Call of Duty has had on the last decade of gaming. I don't think the battle royale landscape will be the same after it launches this fall.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

38 Call Of Duty: Black Ops 4

Treyarch pushes the envelope by eliminating the Call of Duty campaign in Black Ops 4. We go hands-on for hours with the bold battle royale experiment to find out if the gambit works. ***by Daniel Tack***

10 The Game Designers Of The Future
The annual Girls Make Games competition gets young girls together to show off their art, programming, and game-making skills to a panel of judges from Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo. We checked it out to get a sense of the event.

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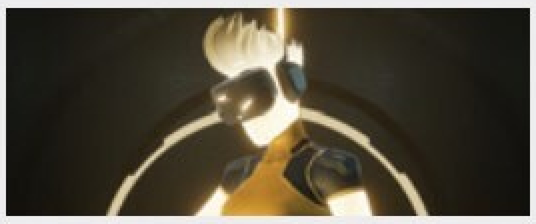
We visited The Strong museum to check out the rarest pieces amongst its impressive collection.



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Azeroth doesn't quite reach the heights of Legion, but it's still a solid expansion.

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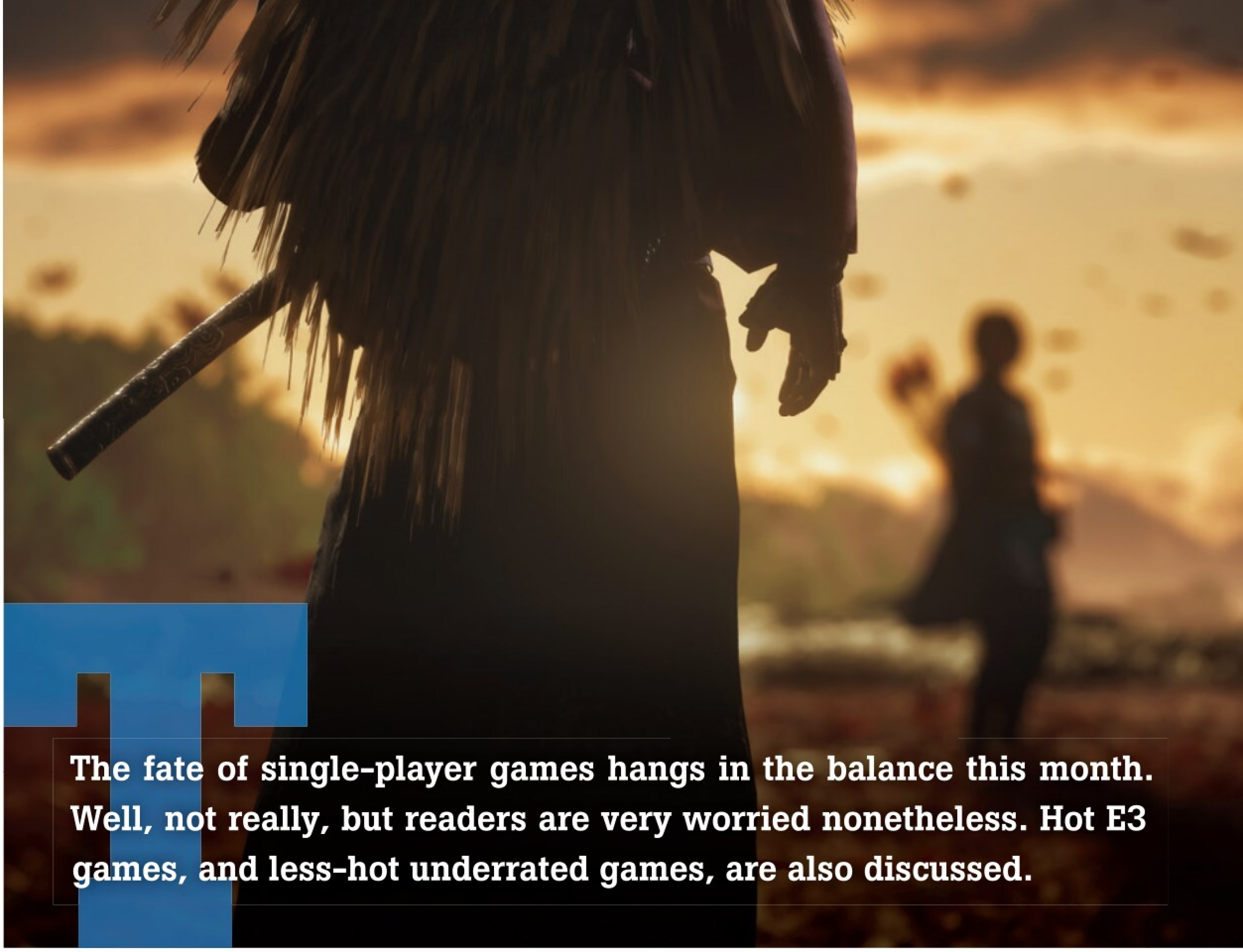

The fate of single-player games hangs in the balance this month. Well, not really, but readers are very worried nonetheless. Hot E3 games, and less-hot underrated games, are also discussed.

Still Got It!

As I was reading through your E3 Hot 50 round-up in issue 304 (which really should've been in reverse order like the Top 300), I was impressed that many of the developers I grew up with in the early PS1 and PS2 days – like Naughty Dog, Insomniac, and Sucker Punch – are still leading the charge 20 years later. Insomniac's fantastic take on our favorite web-slinger has been well-documented in the pages of this magazine, and like pretty much everyone, I was absolutely blown away by The Last of Us Part II's presence at E3. Amazingly, I find myself even more excited about Sucker Punch's Ghost of Tsushima, which looks to be a truly groundbreaking new IP and marks a dramatic shift for the studio. All in all, I just want to give props to these incredible developers who are continuing to push the boundaries of the video game industry today, just as they have been for decades.

Andrew Burnes
Terrell, Texas

Sony had a solid line-up of big-name exclusives at E3 this year – and based on their long-running partnerships, the publisher clearly knows how to keep its talent happy. Seeing as how we get to enjoy the amazing games they make together, it's a win for everybody! Well, maybe not Xbox owners… *ahem* moving on.

Still Scared For Single-Player

I have been a gamer since the days of the Atari. I am sad to see so many games going "always online." I like playing games the old-fashioned way: single-player and offline. But it seems like those days are coming to an end. Everything seems to indicate that future consoles will be always online and streaming-focused. If single-player gaming goes away or becomes a permanent always-online deal, then I will just flat-out quit gaming all together.

Rocky Johnson
via email

As a gamer who started with pinball, I am upset to see people talking about ending the run of single-player campaigns in my favorite video games. I have bought every top-line first-person shooter since Doom on PC. That's a lot of money spent on gaming. It's simple: No campaign, no more video games.

Tina Martinez
via email

If there's one thing readers love, it's worrying about the fate of single-player games. However, while titles like Call of Duty and Overwatch may be experimenting with multiplayer-only offerings, the single-player scene is healthier than ever. Not only were both of 2017's GOTY contenders (Zelda: Breath of the Wild and Horizon Zero Dawn) single-player games, the majority of our E3 Hot 50 line-up was as well. Cyberpunk 2077, Spider-Man, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Kingdom Hearts III, Rage 2, and many, many more upcoming games ensure that whatever your genre of choice, you'll have plenty of great options to play by yourself in the coming years. On the other hand…

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War Changes

I, along with a great deal of other Fallout fans, feel the series has taken a turn for the worse. Fallout 76 feels lazy, and saying that you "create your own story" in the world is a cheap excuse by Bethesda to not write one. They did this with Elder Scrolls Online, too – I was ecstatic to hear of a new Elder Scrolls game, and rightfully angry to find out it was an online game. Stop it! Keep single-player games SINGLE, or have separate online co-op if they really want people to play together.

John J.
via email

We too have reservations about Fallout 76's proposed approach to storytelling (specifically the lack of any human NPCs in the new West Virginia-based wasteland), but we won't fault Bethesda for wanting to try something new – especially considering Todd Howard has already confirmed you can play the game solo. As with the Call of Duty haters we continually hear from (who we're sure will love this month's cover story), we urge you to not start lambasting Fallout 76 until you actually know more about it. Lucky for you, we've got a ton of new details starting on page 52!

The Magic Word

I have been ecstatic since E3 for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. I'm 13 years old and I've played every game in the series, so I'm not missing this one. However, I've been bored waiting for December, so if you guys could please do at least one more Smash Bros. article, it would make the time go by a little faster. Also, what are your opinions on some of the leaked characters like Decidueye & Simon Belmont?

Sage Smith
via email

Since you asked so politely, Sage, you'll find a new Smash Bros. preview on page 60 (granted, so will everyone else). As for the rumors of new contenders, we're guessing Decidueye will be relegated to a support Pokémon if it's in the game at all. Belmont has recently been confirmed however, and his whip...sure looks whippy?

Fighting The Good Fight

In last issue's On Your Mind sidebar, I noticed you guys received almost as much negative feedback to your Women Creating A Brighter Future For Games article (issue 302) as positive. I'm extremely disappointed so many people would take offense to that article and complain about it. I'm a 24-year-old woman who has been playing games since I was three. When I started college, my goal was to become a video game programmer, but I swiftly changed majors after the treatment I received from professors and classmates. Six years later, I largely regret that decision because I love to code and my passion really is in the gaming industry. The only thing that kept me from realizing my dream was a scared little girl who didn't know how to handle herself in situations involving sexism. It's upsetting that the crap I dealt with growing up in the gaming community (getting kicked from raid groups because I'm a girl, not being taken seriously in competitive gaming, sexual harassment, etc.) is still just as prominent as it was then. I still absolutely love gaming, the friends I've made, and the awesome events I've attended. But the fact that my 10-year-old sister, who dreams of becoming a programmer for Minecraft, is going to have to jump all the same hurdles of sexism that I did disappoints me.

Lindsey L.
via email

We share your frustration, Lindsey. However, the hate mail we received isn't just more evidence of the gender issues the video game industry faces; it also highlights how important it is for women to continue sharing their stories and experiences. On the bright side, the letters we've received about Kim's article since last month have been more and more positive, so people are taking notice – in part thanks to readers like you.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Do you guys know when Medieval Remastered is coming out?"

Not soon enough!… said no one. (Release is still TBA.)

"How many people are aware that Days Gone is being made by the Bubsy 3D devs?"

Probably more people than Bend Studio would prefer.

"Can you talk to anyone about bringing the MLB: The Show series to Xbox?"

We could, but seeing as how it's owned by Sony, it probably won't help much.

Reader Gibberish:

"Hello , Are you still writing blogs? As a gamer who is other you?"

Question Of The Month:

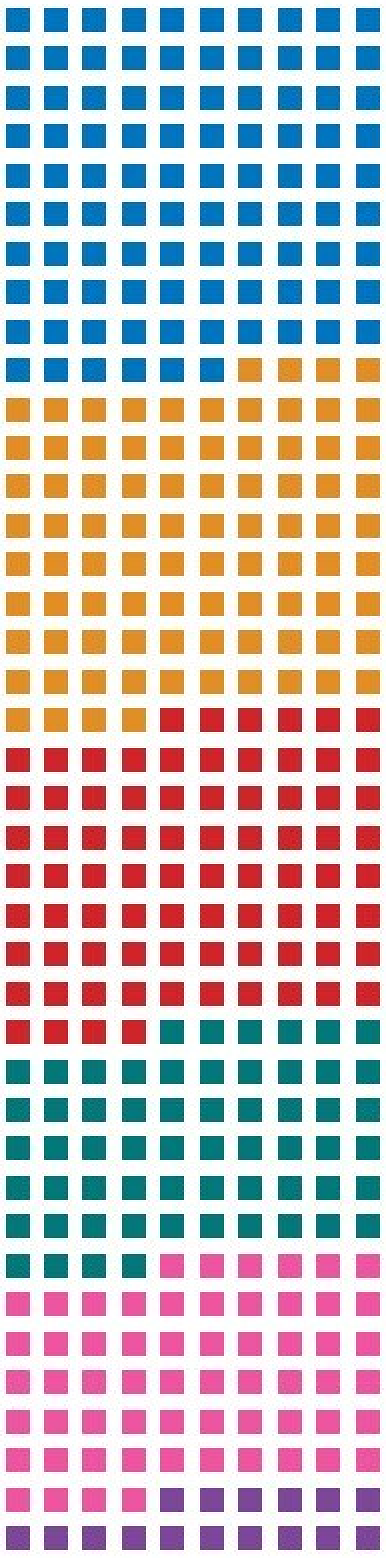
Alright, COD haters, here's your chance: What do you want to see from the future of Call of Duty?

gi spy

(Left) This month, Treyarch's David Vonderhaar, Dan Bunting, and Activision's Kyle Walker gave us the inside scoop on Black Ops 4's battle royale Blackout mode. Read all about it on page 38. **(Right)** Zen Studios' Mel Kirk and Desiree Frost stopped by the office to talk about the future of pinball – and the old Red Octane Guitar Hero days.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



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- 🟧 Fall Game Line-up Hype
- 🟥 “Stop Killing Single-Player!”
- 🟩 Respect For Women In Games
- ■ Underrated Game Love
- 🟪 Fallout 76 Skepticism

Criminal Oversight

In issue 304, we asked readers what the most underrated game of 2018 is so far. Readers responded with some great picks for you to check out. Well, except for that last guy.

I think the most underrated game of 2018 is Telltale’s Batman: The Enemy Within. Telltale has low-key made one of the best Batman stories out there, and the way The Enemy Within treats its cast with genuine empathy is remarkable. Seeing Bruce struggle to have a friendship with someone who just might be crazier than him, and having the game treat them both humanely, is incredible.

Henry Chan

My vote for most underrated game would be Unravel 2. I was a big fan of the first game, and not only did the sequel give me more clever platforming, the co-op allowed me to share it all with my wife. People need to stop hating on Yarny already!

Aaron MacDonald

Ni No Kuni II definitely needs more love. Not only is the art style still incredible, I am really enjoying the kingdom building elements and recruiting new allies. No other series is as charming as Ni No Kuni – more people need to buy it so that Level 5 keeps making sequels.

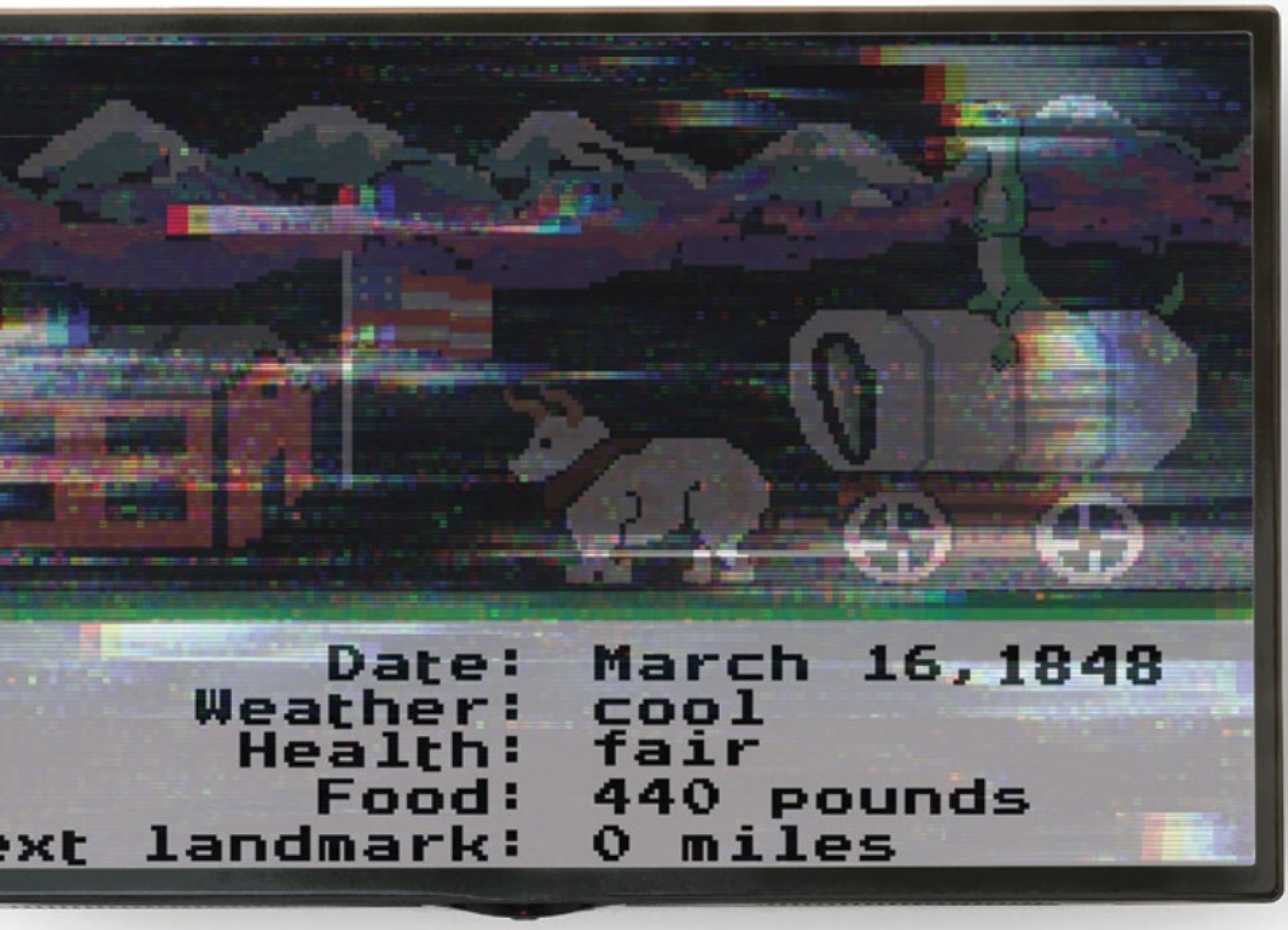
Jenni Davidson

Technically all the games that haven’t released yet are underrated, since, you know, they don’t have a rating.

Sam Caloras

(Left) This month we met with some of the fine folks at the Strong National Museum of Play, who are working to preserve video game history. Keep up the good work!
(Right) Fiftycc’s Lizzie Cuevas and Games Done Quick’s Mike Uyama cheered on speedrunners Shockwve and Konasumi during this year’s SGDQ.

(continued on page 8)



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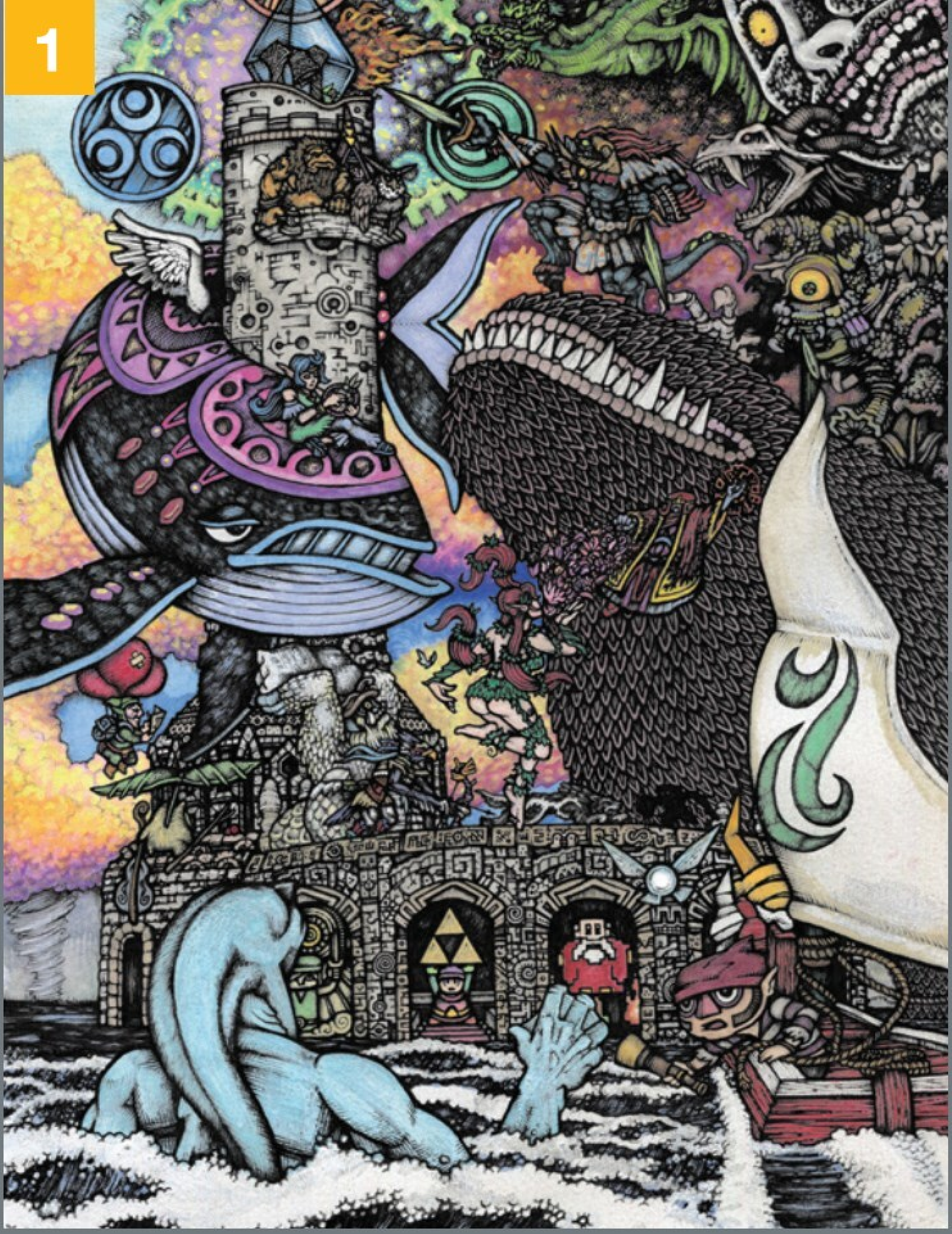


WINNER

1 Caleb Zweifler

Look closely and you will find your favorite Zelda entry represented somewhere in Caleb's dense, impressive love letter to Nintendo's fantasy series.

2 Eddie Sole

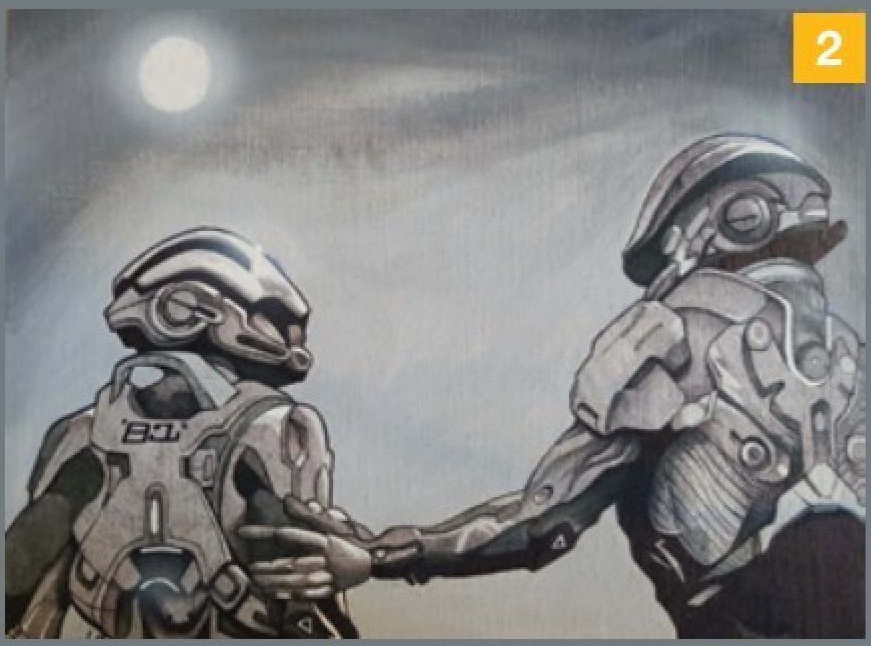
Mass Effect Andromeda may have come up short in a number of ways, but it's hard to complain about the art direction and the fan art it inspires.

3 Penelope Suffern

It's about time we get to see what Yoshi and Dry Bones looked like as babies! This art also confirms that Toad is pretty much ageless.

4 Danny Rust

We've all got the Red Dead Redemption sequel on our mind, but Danny clearly wants Rockstar to not forget about Bully.



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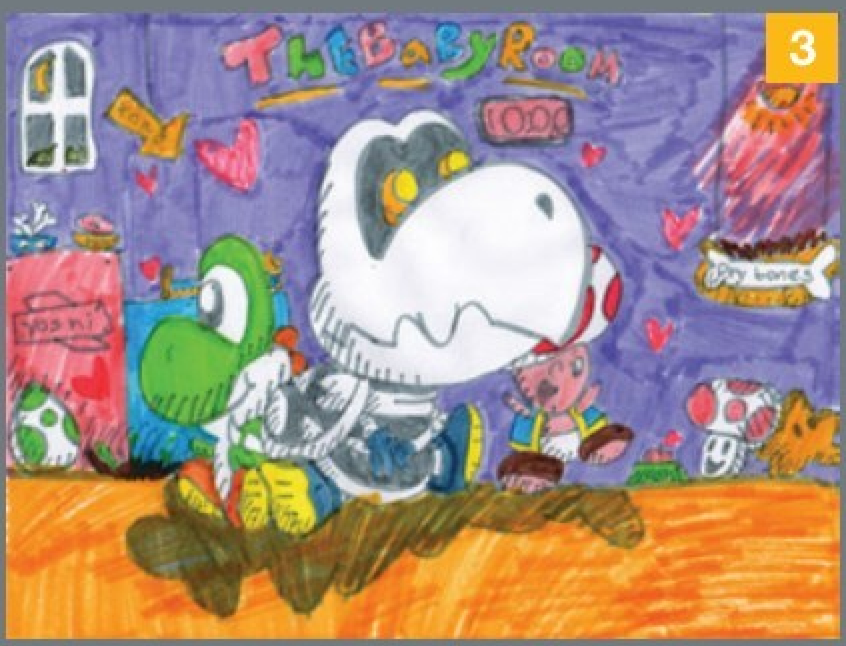

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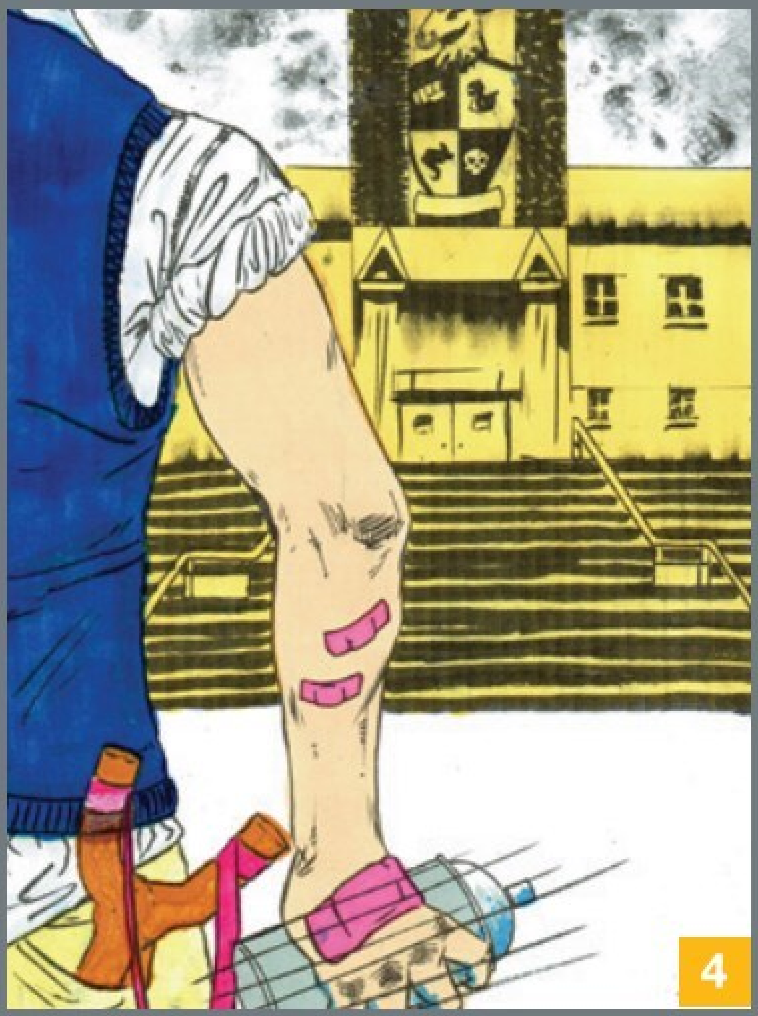

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(continued from page 6)

(Left) Eduardo "PR Balrog" Perez, Daigo Umehara, Keita "Fuudo" Ai, and Bruce "Gamerbee" Hsiang joined Suriel for a fight at this year's Evo Championship Series. **(Right)** G.I. interns Jacob Geller, Camden Jones, and Derek Swinhart enjoyed a night of board games after their tour of duty. Thanks for the hard work, guys!

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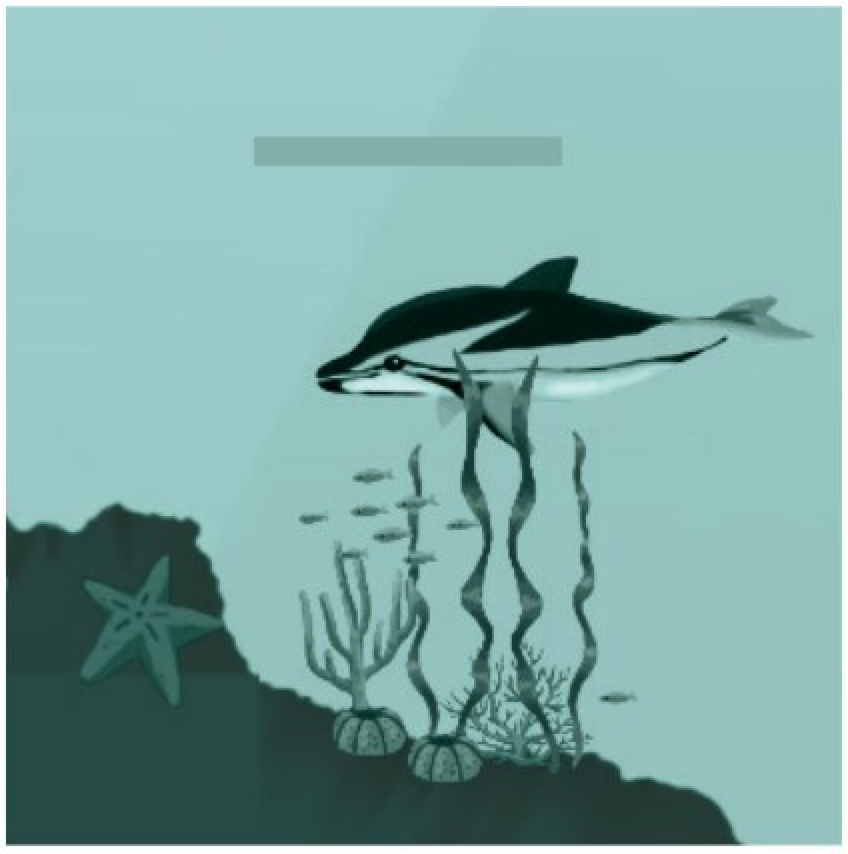


THE GAME DESIGNERS OF THE FUTURE

Girls Make Games' Demo Day gives a glimpse at the bright and budding talent ahead

by Kimberley Wallace

The video game industry continues to evolve and grow in exciting ways. We've come a long way since the days of two paddles and a ball with Pong, challenging the conventions of what a video game can be. In recent years, we've had games tackling complex issues like mental illness, housing vast open worlds to explore, and connecting people through cooperation and competition. Technology as a career is projected to grow at a faster rate than any other field in the next decade at 13 percent. *CNN* continually lists game design in this category, calling it one of the best jobs in America in terms of pay, growth, and satisfying work.

The kids playing games now have had technology embedded in their lives from an early age, and they will no doubt dictate its future. Having more programs to help this younger generation thrive and embrace their creativity is important. While preparation for the challenges ahead is key, they also need to see the possibilities of their future, making a career in game development or tech feel within reach. Girls Make Games is just one place fostering the next generation of talent, giving girls ages 8 to 17 a place to explore their passion for video games and what it means to work together and create a video game prototype.

We attended Girls Make Games' annual Demo Day to see the top 5 (of 33) teams present their ideas and demo their projects to a panel of industry judges from video games' biggest publishers, including Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo. While this story could merely discuss the finalists and ultimate winner, the day proved so much more than that. Passion, positivity, and creativity were all on display, showcasing the great potential for the future of the industry. Event judge and chairman of Sony Worldwide Studios Shawn Layden put it best: "I've been watching the future all day today. And the future is secure."

Passion And Presentation

A common love for something often brings people together, but it takes a special dedication and collaboration to bring an idea to life. For the last five years, Girls Make Games has been helping young minds come together to learn about game development and explore the ups and downs of the process. In three-week summer camps that take place all over the country, the girls are tasked with coming up with a prototype and preparing it for market, covering everything from how to handle unexpected setbacks to selecting the best platforms for their ideas. They all have stories about challenges with learning the technology, working as a group to incorporate everyone's ideas, and facing losing days of work. All that time and effort is spent in the name of winning the top prize: the chance to see their game made via a Kickstarter campaign, where they act as directors, making the big behind-the-scenes decisions about its creation going forward. Excitement and nerves were in the air, but a sense of pride and accomplishment came across in every presentation.

The year's panel of judges featured a handful of industry veterans: Phil Spencer (executive VP of gaming at Microsoft), Shawn Layden (chairman of Sony Worldwide Studios), Devon Pritchard (executive VP of business affairs at Nintendo), Connie Booth (chairman of Sony Worldwide Studios), and Anna Sweet (senior VP of business development at Caffeine). The panel listened to each of the five teams present their ideas and show their games in action. Afterward, the judges asked questions regarding their creative vision, the logistics of their plan, and what they want to expand upon for the full product.

The result was well-articulated responses and a plethora of different genres and topics. The mix included platformer, puzzle, and horror games integrating serious topics like bullying and ocean pollution, as well as lighthearted moments like taking the role of a detective blobfish. "I felt everything today," Pritchard says. "I laughed. I almost cried. I was scared. That's what makes a great game: the emotion."

"What I felt in that room is a reflection of the truth," Spencer adds. "Nearly two billion people play video games – young, old, male, female. Video games is a mainstream activity, whether it's being played on the phone, a PC, or on a PS4, Switch, or Xbox One."

The day was about celebrating creativity and teamwork, but what was most surprising was just how well-thought-out and fresh all these ideas were. During the awards ceremony, Sweet commented on the marketability of all the creations on display, "You guys are so ahead of the game," she says. "I used to be responsible for picking all of the indie games that come out on Steam when I worked at Valve, and there were a ton of games here I thought I'd gladly put on the platform."

Xbox's Phil Spencer (left) and PlayStation's Shawn Layden served as event judges

The Challengers

Sending your idea off into the world to be critiqued is one of the scariest things for any creator. The participants willingly put their work on display, speaking in front of an audience of their peers, family members, and key players in the industry. The best part is seeing these young minds embrace their ideas with confidence and watching them unafraid to step outside the box. The Girls Make Games camp put teams together for three weeks, and these are only a fraction of the ideas they came up with. As you'll notice, the variety between them is stark. You can play demos and watch trailers for all the games at the Girls Make Games official website.

THE RETURN

Team Clementine Crew from Mountain View, CA was inspired to create something stress-free and relaxing to play – the direct opposite of the bombastic, violent, and intense action games we so often see. This vibrant, pixelated puzzle game is all about following patterns to find solutions. You play as a fairy trying to find her way home, making your way through mazes and figuring out riddles. Each of the four-member team designed her own puzzle, as a way to all have their own mark on the game. The Return won the award for best design.

LUKA

Horror games are a dime a dozen these days, but often the best ones focus on creating the atmosphere and putting an extra emphasis on sound. Team Arks from San Mateo, CA wanted to capture the subtlety that makes the genre so great. In Luka, you wake up with no memory in an eerie hospital, where you search for clues and confront creepy creatures. A ghost demon child named Luka continually haunts you throughout the game. The team said the closer you get to the end, the more it "messes with you." The game took home the honor of most original.

KAIYO

Kaiyo, which is the Japanese word for ocean, is an educational game that has you helping clean up the sea. As a dolphin, you must pick up trash and battle genetically modified sea life. You learn facts about the various animals you encounter along the way. Team Valtameri from Mountain View, CA created the game in response to our polluted oceans, wanting to bring more awareness to the crisis and how it affects the wildlife. Kaiyo was awarded most artistic.

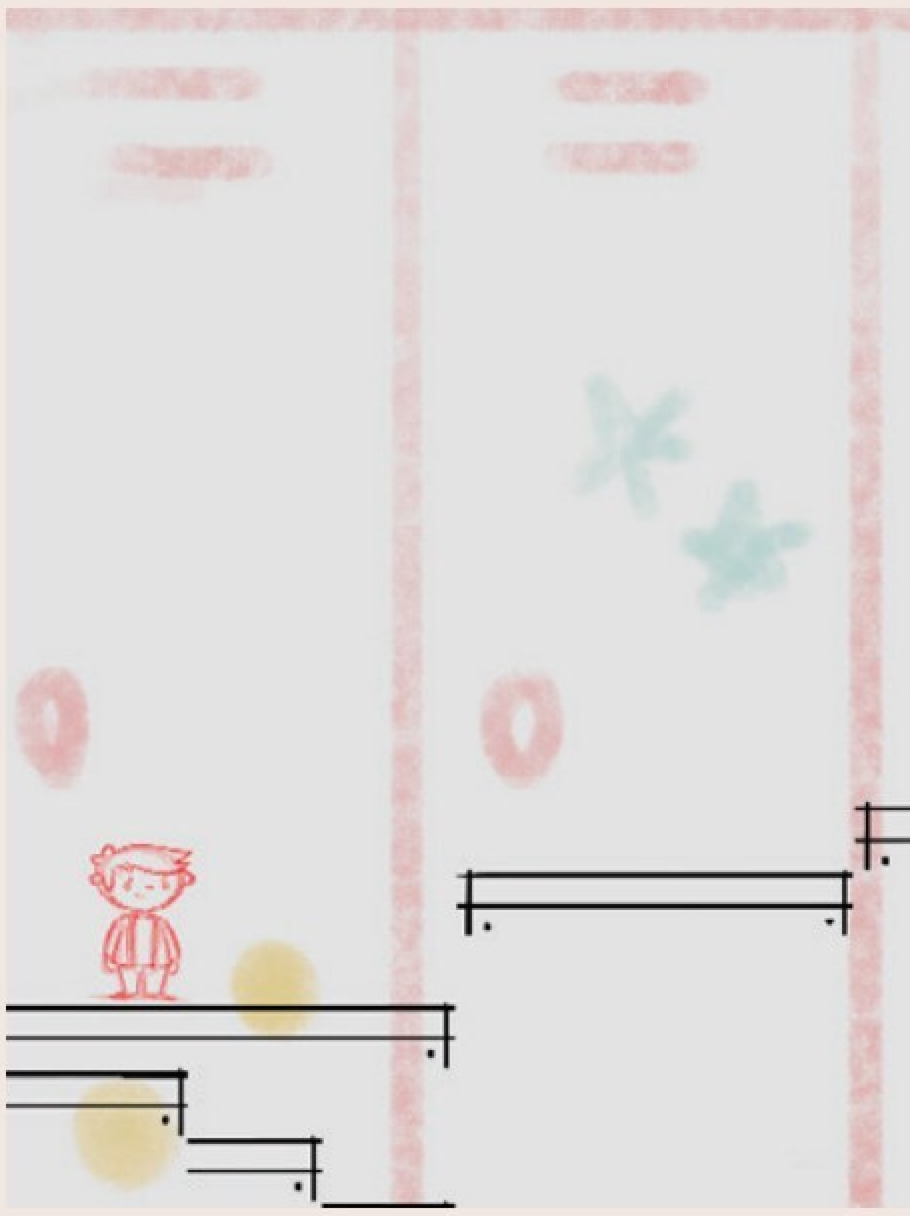
DETECTIVE BLOBFISH

The Mystery Squirrels from Mountain View, CA were the youngest team in the final five with members aged 9 to 11. The girls weren't afraid to get a little silly, using fun dialogue and putting their love for cheese puffs into this murder mystery. In the adventure game, you go around as a detective searching a beach town for clues and interviewing three suspects to find a murderer. True to its spirit, Detective Blobfish earned the most fun award.

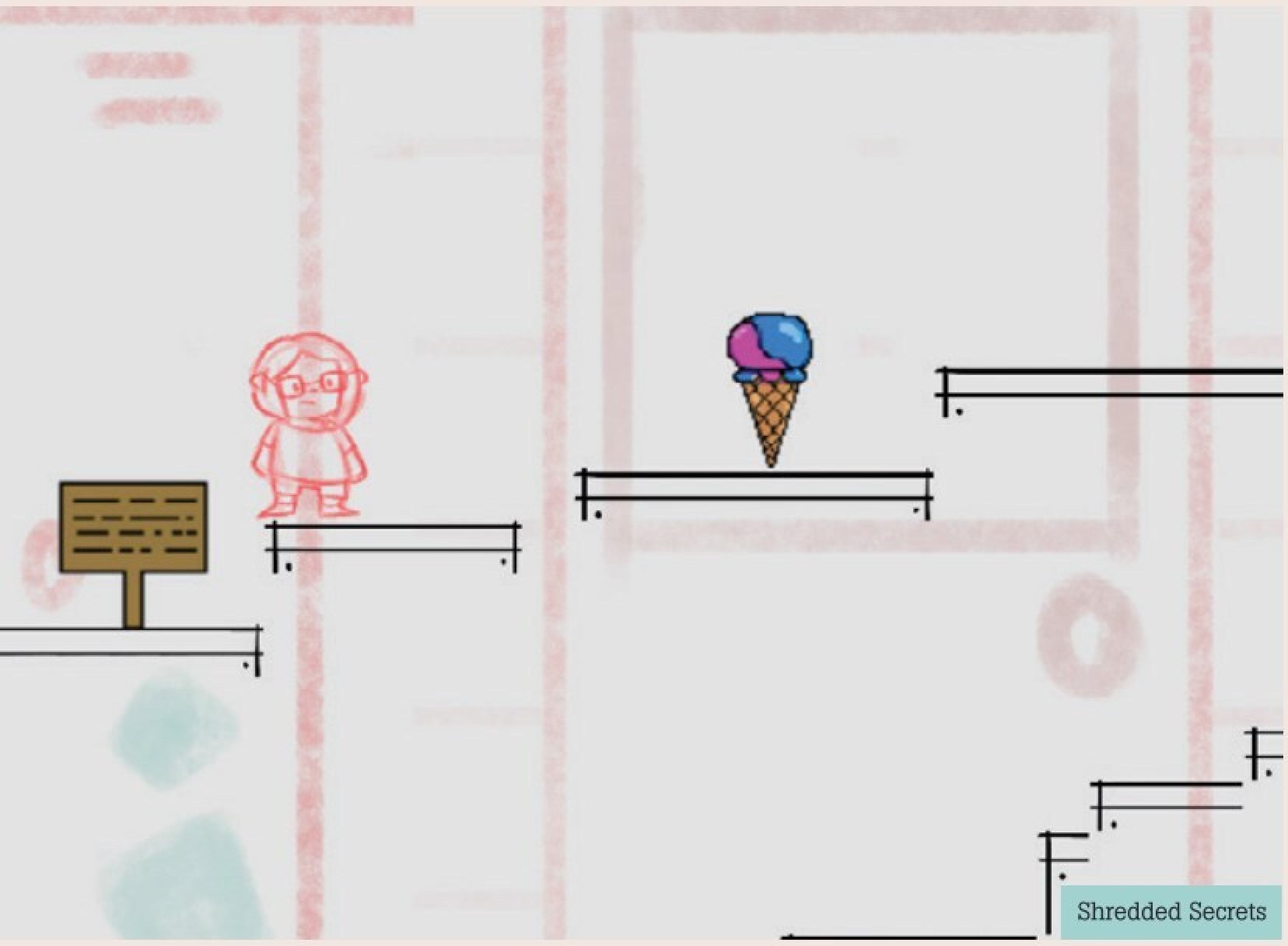
And The Winner Is...

Each one of the five finalists won an award for an area they excelled in, from most original concept to best game design, but only one could win the top prize. The judges had a difficult decision when selecting the winner (for a full list of games see The Challengers sidebar), but one game's message and concept stood out the most: Shredded Secrets. The game, which also won for best narrative, is centered on bullying and comes from the Seattle-based team Sarcastic Shark Clouds. Shredded Secrets has you playing from the perspective of four characters who each have their own challenges in school and life. You platform through levels as insults are literally being hurled at you. You can heal by using the best medicine around: ice cream. Shredded Secrets' art style is representative doodles on a notebook.

All this would be impressive on its own, except for the time spent devoted to crafting empathy around the bullies. Shredded Secrets was inspired by the girls' own hardships being bullied and soon discovering the bullyies' troubled life at home was causing them to lash out. The topic is relatable, and how all the elements come together is quite clever, but it's the emotional core of Shredded Secrets that really turned heads. The game asks you to "step into someone else's shoes just for a day," and transports you into their world, complete with voice acting conveying their feelings as they try to avoid obstacles and make sense of their struggles. The dialogue feels much like a diary entry, tackling acceptance and discovering the value in embracing who you are. Their main message is simple: "Remember to be kind; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." This wisdom is beyond their years, and refreshing to see in a world where empathy is lacking. Shredded Secrets will be made over the coming year, with a Kickstarter campaign coming to help fund the project. The game is aiming to launch on consoles and PC.



Caffeine's Anna Sweet and Sony's Connie Booth were impressed by the various entrants



Shredded Secrets

Bringing The Camp's Resources To All

Girls Make Games founder Laila Shabir announced a new initiative that's currently in beta for its official website called The Portal. Aiming to bring access and education everywhere, The Portal gives girls around the world a chance to learn about game development all in one easy place. "We want to bring the same validation and power to girls everywhere," Shabir says. The portal will include resources, tutorials, college scholarships, and more. "Some might think these things seem easy to access but if you're from a different part of the world, this will be a life-changing piece of information," Shabir explains.

The Portal was inspired by Shabir's own experience growing up in the United Arab Emirates, where she and her family lived on a visa for her father's job. She felt like an outsider where she could never fit in or be herself. "I lived in a place where expectations on me always wanted to limit me in who I was, what I could say, and what I could do," she explained. "Then one day, my family got the internet, and I suddenly had a portal into the world outside. I learned that it was possible to fulfill my dreams: to go to college, to start my own business, to empower other women to do the same." So far she's done just that and The Portal will be just another way to inspire women who want to go into game development.

Making A Difference

The look on the winning team's faces said it all; they were beaming, putting their hands over their mouths in disbelief. At certain points it looked like tears were about to fall. At such a young age, they can now add this wonderful game to their resume.

Something about the sincerity and compassion shown at this event spoke to something greater. An aura of optimism and positivity was in the air as the backdrop to a brighter future. This is especially refreshing for an industry that has seen its share of turmoil in the past few years, from harassment campaigns to more revelations of gender discrimination in the workplace. "When I look at the future, I think there are two things that are really going to drive the industry forward," Pritchard explains. "One is the diversity of thought and the other is the diversity of the people who make games. That's going to help us evolve as an industry and really bring us into the future. And from what I see today, we are in really fantastic hands."

The Sarcastic Shark Clouds celebrate their win

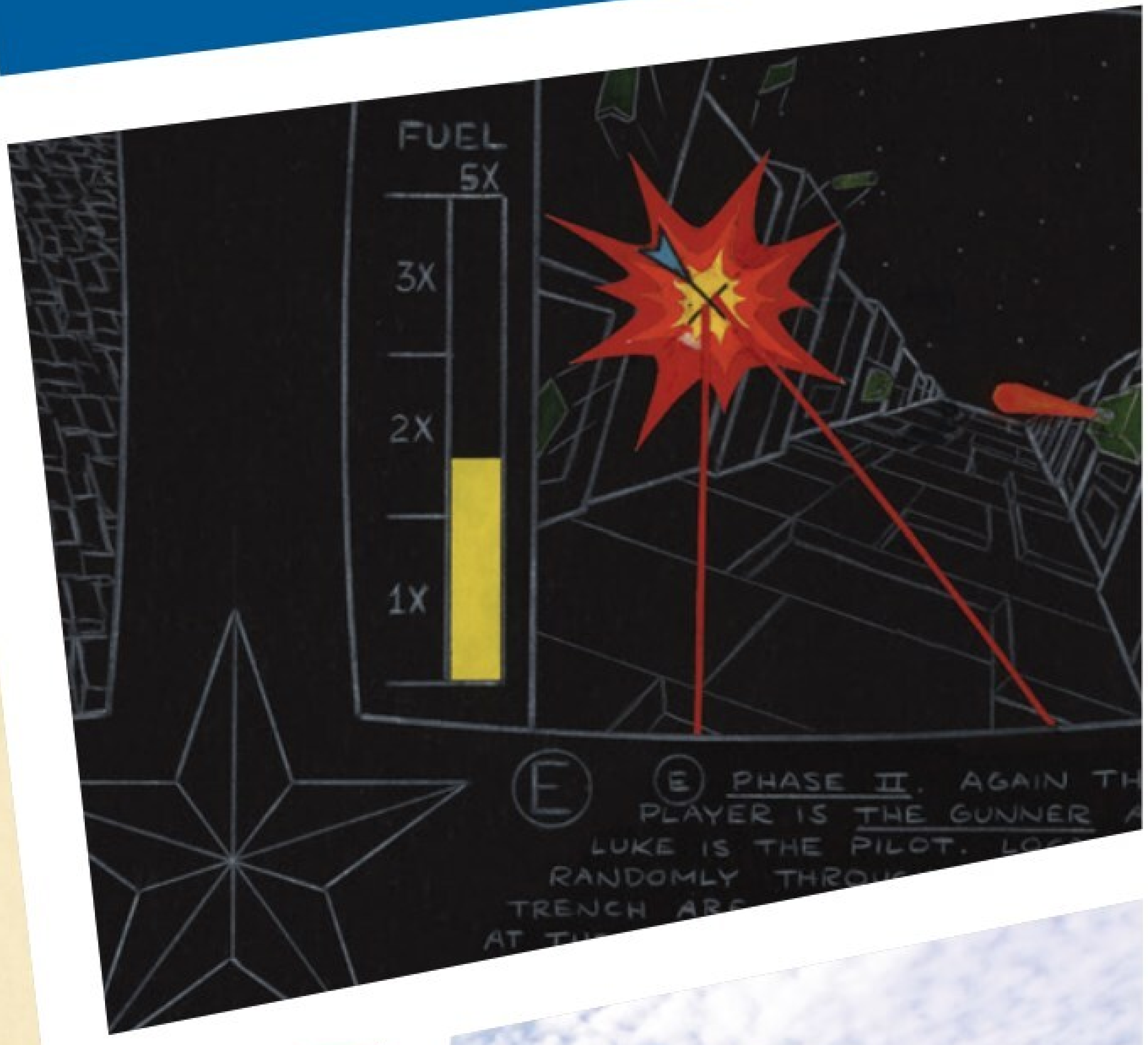
While there's definitely more awareness of diversity than ever before, the disparity between men and women in game development is still large. According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), only a little over 20 percent of women are in game development roles compared to men. The U.S. Department of Commerce reports that although women occupy close to half the jobs in the U.S. Economy, they hold less than 25 percent of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) jobs.

However, as the Demo Day signified, a change is currently occurring in video games with more awareness of these issues alongside programs, such as Girls Make Games, Pixelles Montreal, Facebook's Women in Gaming, and more on the horizon to help bridge these gaps. Not only is effort being put in to support the next generation of developers, but the key players across the industry are acknowledging that having a more diverse workplace to cater to gaming's growing audience is vital. When game development professionals were asked in a 2016 IGDA survey about the importance of diversity, 78 percent reported believing that diversity in the workplace was "very" or "somewhat important."

"I see this kind of work happening in this industry more and more," Spencer says. "I think that's a great thing for our industry and it shows the rising consciousness of the industry on social issues and who we are and the role that our art form plays in society. I think there's a huge responsibility there and it's great to see teams stepping into that responsibility."

Perhaps the most telling was Girls Make Games founder Laila Shabir's closing words to describe her journey creating the camp and why she does it. "My father often says, 'If you educate a girl, you educate a nation.' When I was a child, I never knew what that meant. Now, seeing so many young girls understand what they are capable of, and hearing so many leaders welcome their creativity and innovation, I'm beginning to understand what he meant." ◆

A Strong Gra
On History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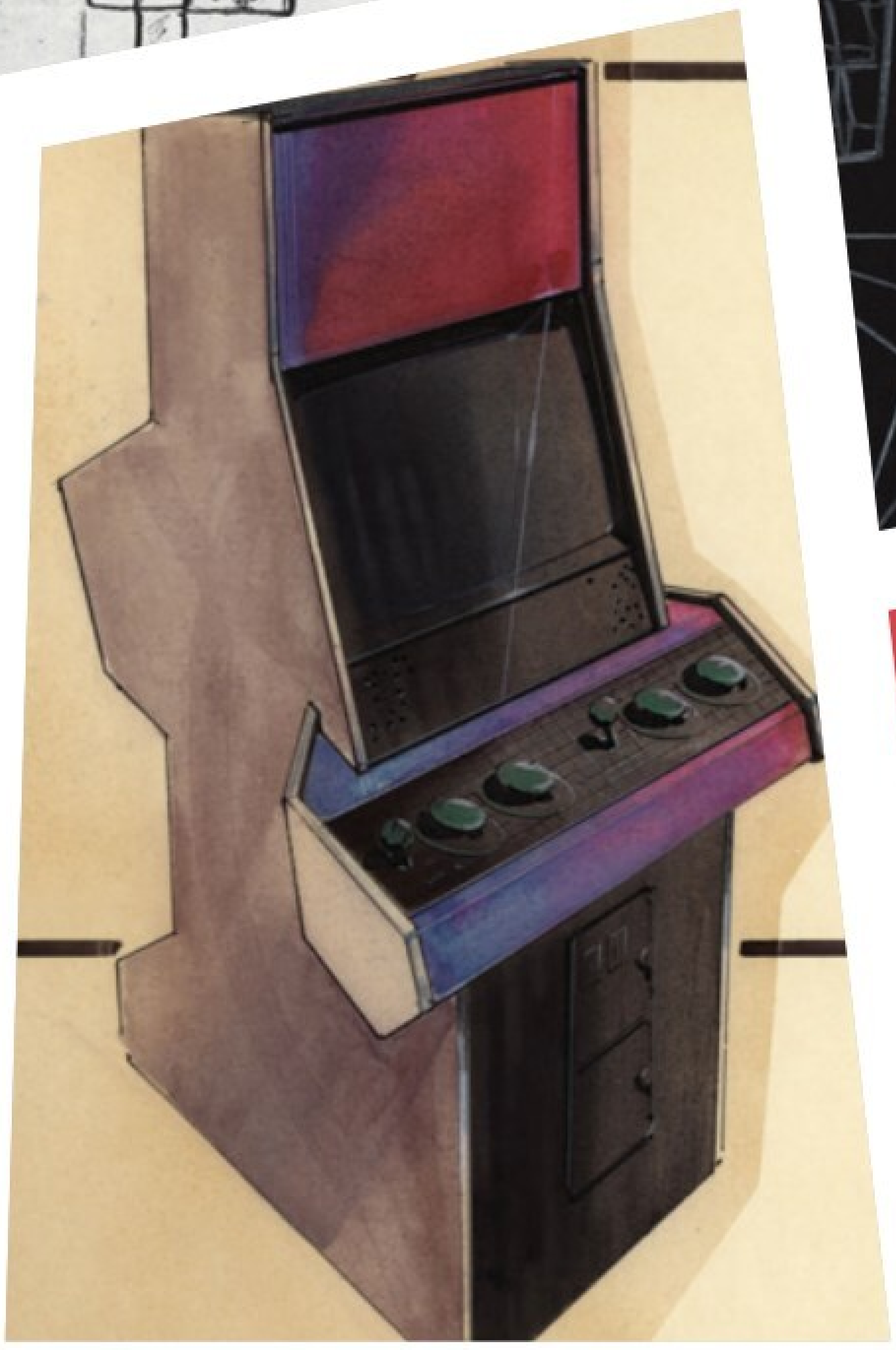

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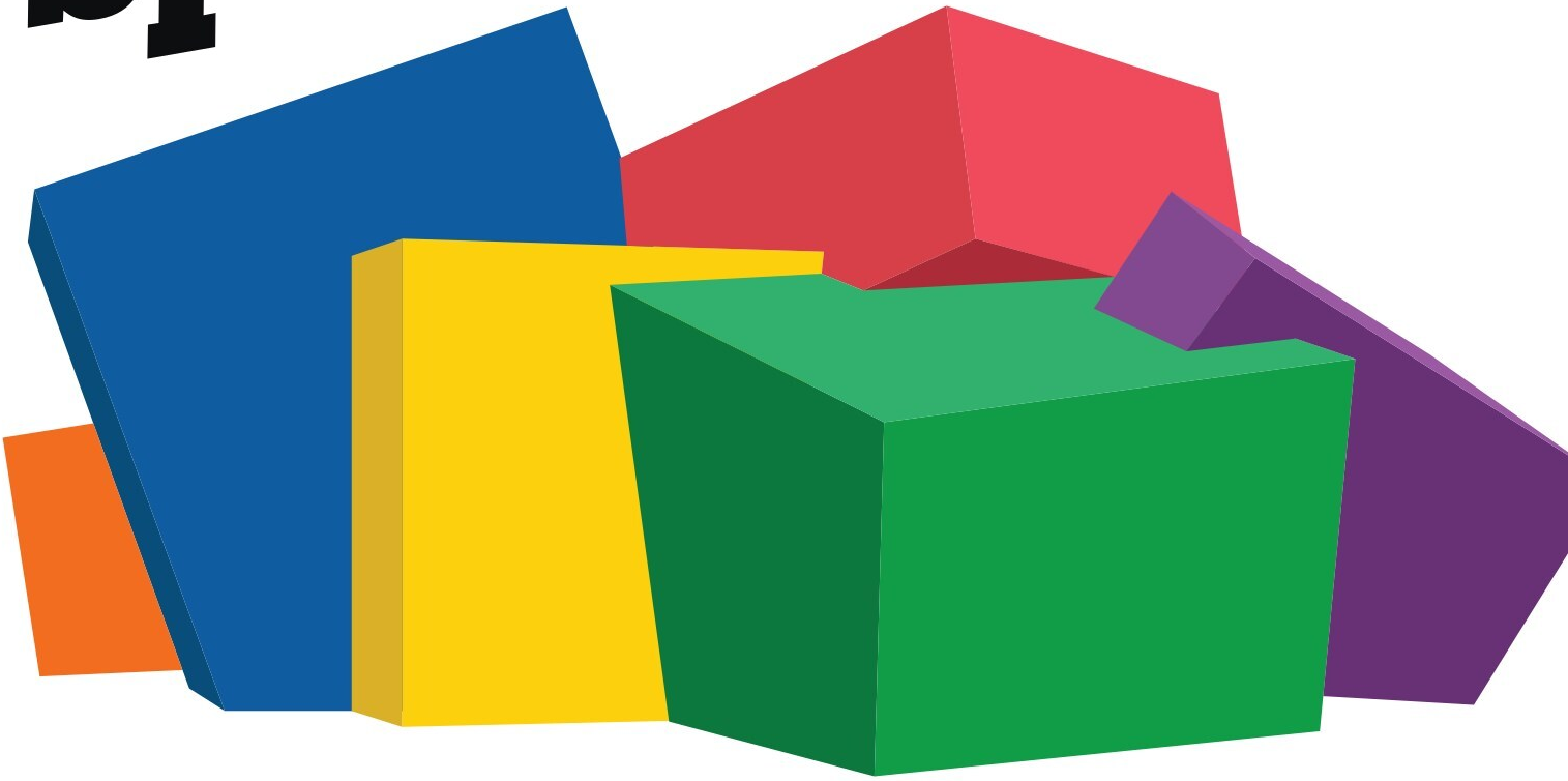
Perusing the oddities from the largest video game collection in the world



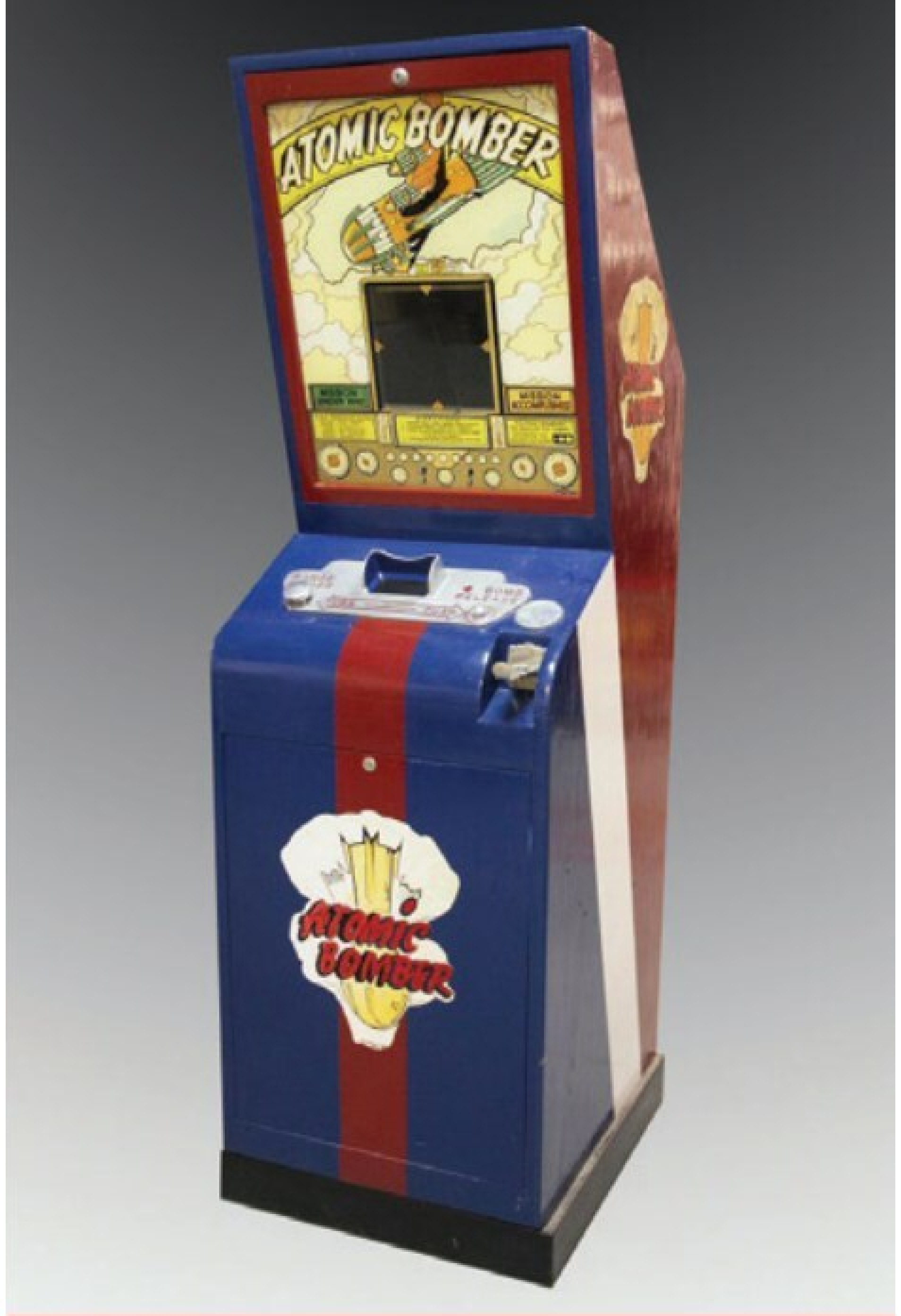
By Ben Reeves

In 1991, SimCity creator Will Wright lost his home in a California wild fire that cut through Oakland. The experience was crushing, but it gave birth to an idea. What if there was a game where players didn't have to worry about combat, puzzles, or death-defying stunts? What if a game just let players simulate day-to-day life in a virtual dollhouse? After losing most of his possessions, Wright was more enamored than ever with this kind of peaceful play. This virtual dollhouse was initially met with a great deal of skepticism within the walls of Wright's company, Maxis, but those detractors were silenced when The Sims went on to become one of the best-selling video game franchises of all time.

Wright wrote down many of his ideas for The Sims in a series of simple white legal pads. These pads show the evolution of The Sims from concept to cultural phenomenon. Those who flip through these tattered and coffee-stained pages walk away with a sense of Wright's freeform creativity, understanding how he wrestled with the incredibly complex idea of simulating life. Charts that detail a sim's happiness meters are sandwiched between grocery lists and notes from EA buyout meetings. Will Wright's notebooks are a rare look into the mind of one of the most beloved video game designers on the planet. They're irreplaceable.

Years after the release of The Sims, when another fire threatened Wright's home, the designer realized his notebooks needed preservation. Wright rounded up all the notebooks he'd kept throughout the development of SimCity, The Sims, and Spore, and donated them to The Strong museum in Rochester, New York. Now these books are under lock and key inside The Strong's climate-controlled archives, where they will be safely observed by fellow designers and historians for decades, if not centuries.

Like Will Wright's notebooks, each item inside The Strong tells its own story. We spent a day touring this massive collection, and went behind the scenes with its curators to uncover some of the institution's most bizarre and lesser-known gaming treasures.



International Mutoscope's Atomic Bomber (c.1946)

On August 6, 1945, an American Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber dropped a five-ton bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima, signaling the end of World War II and ushering forth the Atomic Age. The reverberations of that explosion are still felt today, and social scientists have been dissecting the ethics of nuclear weaponry for nearly a century. But it only took the coin-op industry 15 months to turn the atomic bomb into a game.

International Mutoscope Corp. got its start creating often risqué picture shows contained within freestanding coin-operated cabinets, called mutoscopes. The mutoscope industry quickly mutated to allow for interactive components, and when the world mobilized for war, so did the coin-op industry. During World War II, the International Mutoscope made a fortune on coin-operated games that simulated warfare.

"Some of their more popular products were war-themed games like Sky Fighter and Ace Bomber that focused on artillery shooting, which were sold with slogans like, 'Every American needs to know how to shoot,'" says assistant vice president for interpretation and electronic games Jeremy Saucier, Ph.D. "There are photos and documentation that show that Sky Fighter was to the boardwalks of the '40s what Space Invaders was to the arcades of the late '70s."

In November of 1946, International Mutoscope released Atomic Bomber, which allowed players to simulate the act of dropping atomic weapons on civilian targets. Players looked through a porthole at an internal rotating drum that had been painted to look like a countryside and would then line up their crosshairs with targets on the ground. More accurate players were awarded with a higher score. International Mutoscope created at least two versions of Atomic Bomber, one that allowed bystanders to watch the action, and a later version that featured a light up display of a city enveloped in a mushroom cloud.

"Atomic Bomber shows how uncontroversial that decision to drop the bomb was at the time," Saucier says. "It wasn't until later on that it set in that atomic bombs in the hands of a few people would potentially end the world."

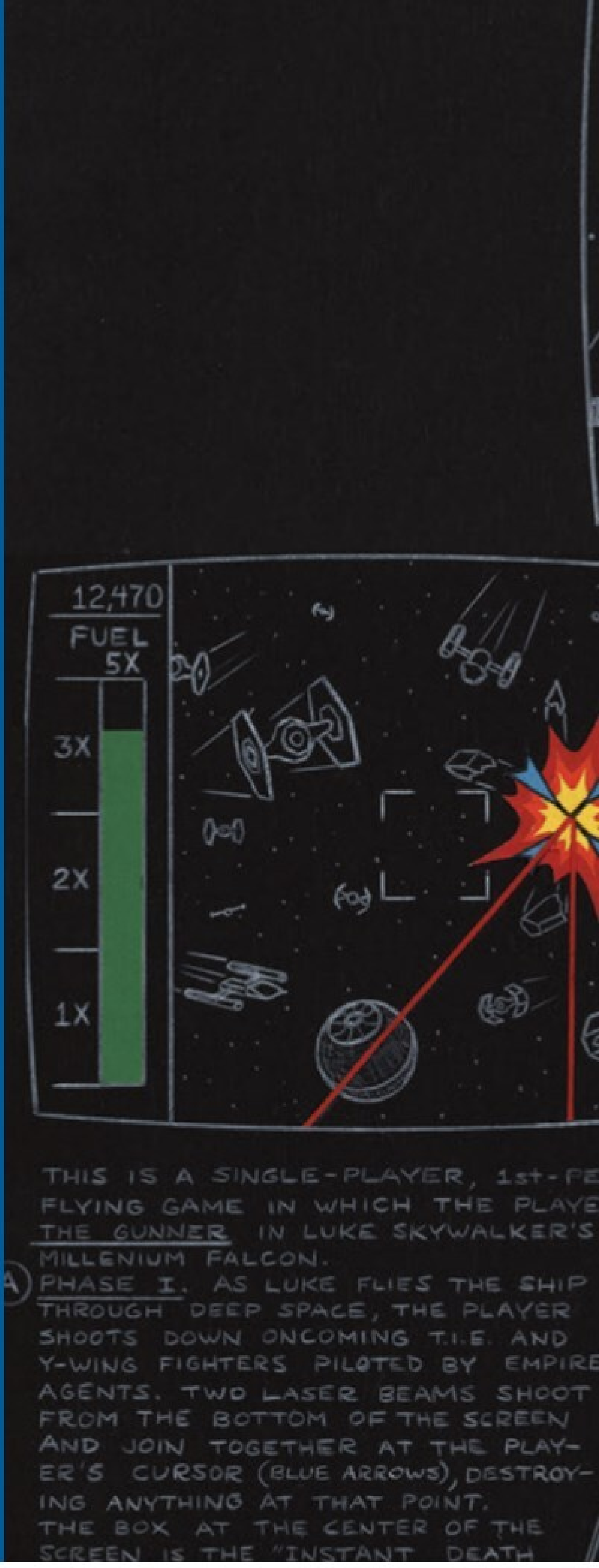
Star Wars Arcade Original Pitch Board (c.1980)

After the release of Pong, Atari built an industry out of researching various new arcade technologies. In the late '70s, one of the hottest technologies was vector graphics, which allowed designers to create neon-like graphics and simulate 3D space. Atari designer Mike Hailey was working on a vector graphics space shooter called Warp Speed when he got the call that he'd have to repurpose his work for a movie license. Atari wanted to base this space shooter on a new independent film that was burning up the box office: *Star Wars*.

Hailey worked furiously to create two poster-sized pitch boards detailing Warp Speed mechanics and showing how they worked as a *Star Wars* arcade game. He even used white colored pencils on black poster board, which created a series of visually striking images.

"I haven't seen many storyboards like this," Saucier says. "The original storyboards only showed two game sequences based on the dogfight and trench fighting movie scenes. During a visit to Atari's design lab filmmaker Steven Spielberg saw the game in development and suggested they might consider a sequence where the X-Wing flies over the surface of the Death Star. Building on that comment, they added the 'middle' laser tower sequence."

In fact, the boards featured one potentially deal-breaking mistake, describing one level as follows, "This is a single-player, first-person flying game in which the player is the gunner in Luke Skywalker's *Millennium Falcon*." Despite this gaffe, George Lucas approved the project and even allowed Atari to repurpose audio clips from the film in the game. Atari's *Star Wars* went on to become one of the top selling games of 1983, but these storyboards are one of a kind.



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THE GUNNER IN LUKE SKYWALKER'S
MILLENIUM FALCON.
A) PHASE I. AS LUKE FLIES THE SHIP
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Y-WING FIGHTERS PILOTED BY EMPIRE
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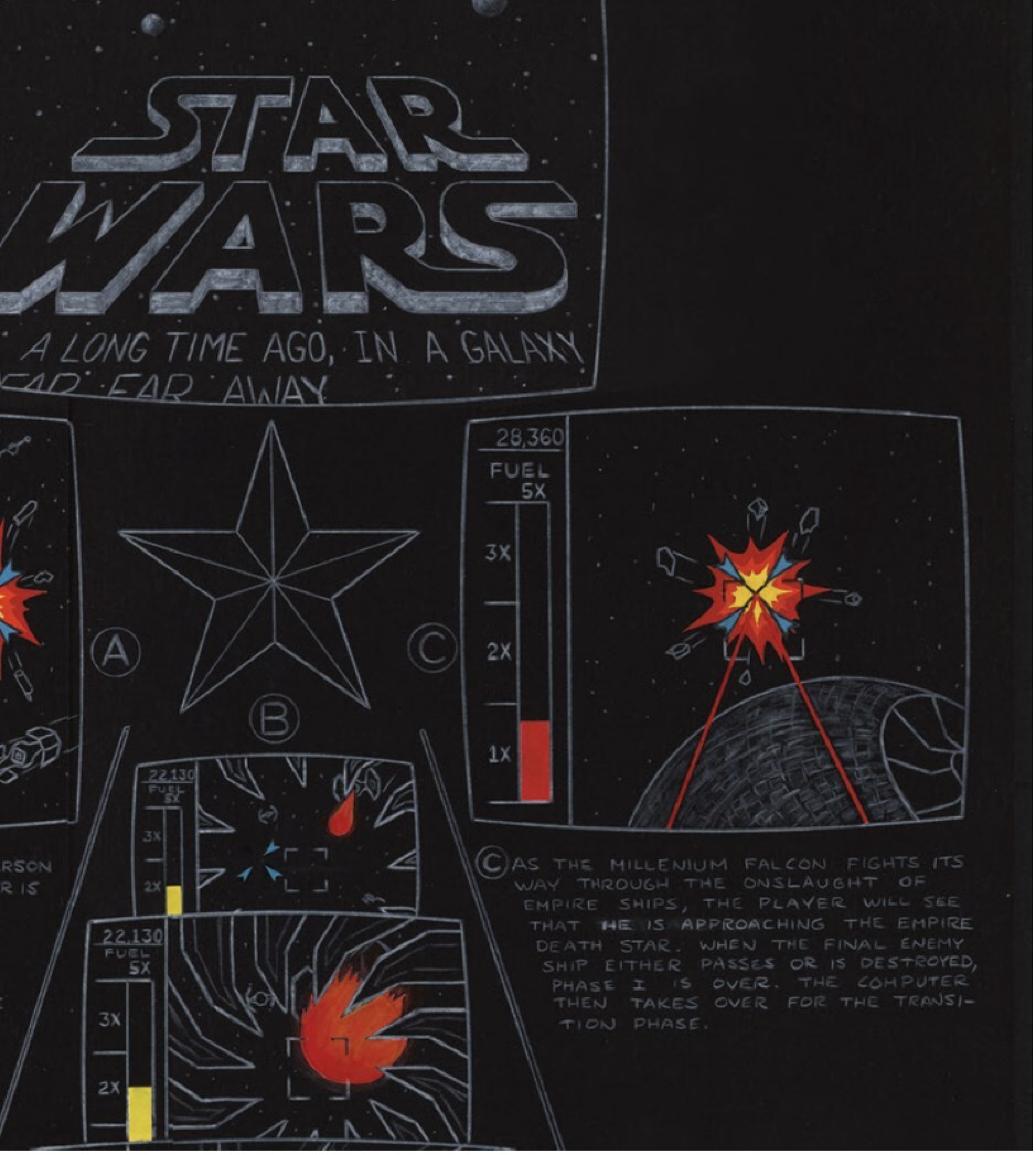
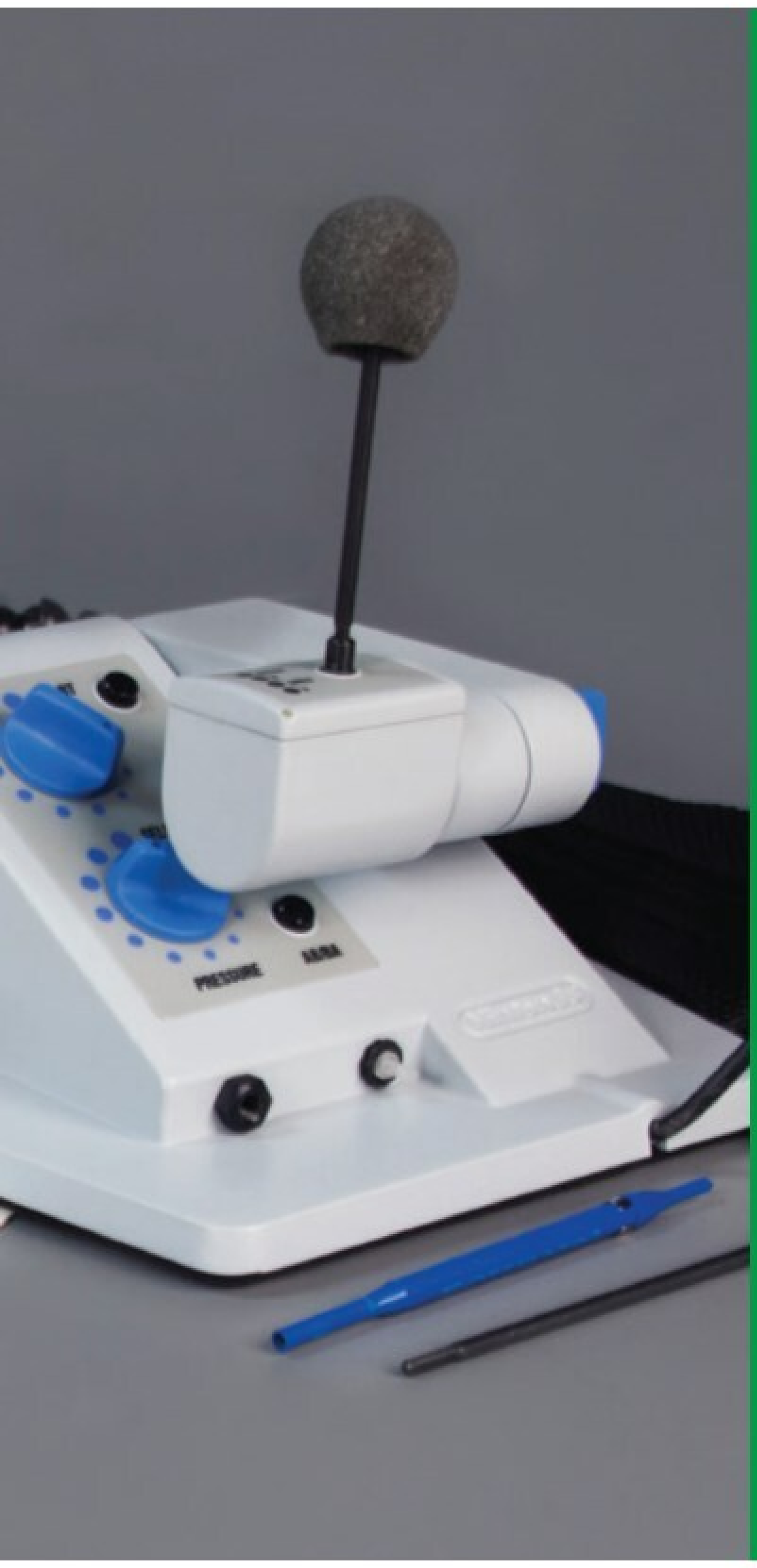


(C) AS THE MILLENIUM FALCON FIGHTS ITS WAY THROUGH THE ONSLAUGHT OF EMPIRE SHIPS, THE PLAYER WILL SEE THAT HE IS APPROACHING THE EMPIRE DEATH STAR. WHEN THE FINAL ENEMY SHIP EITHER PASSES OR IS DESTROYED, PHASE I IS OVER. THE COMPUTER THEN TAKES OVER FOR THE TRANSITION PHASE.

A Curiously Strong Origin Story

Over the last few decades, The Strong has become a mecca for video game historians and pop culture enthusiasts, but the museum didn't always house a world-class video game collection. In 1968, a wealthy heiress named Margaret Woodbury Strong founded a "Museum of Fascination" to display her impressive collection of dolls and 19th-century Japanese art. Over the years, the museum has changed its name and refined its mission, but its collection remains nothing short of fascinating. Today, The Strong is the only collections-based museum devoted solely to the study and exploration of play. Each year, more than half a million people from around the world visit upstate New York and tour The Strong's massive collection of more than 480,000 toys and other archival materials.

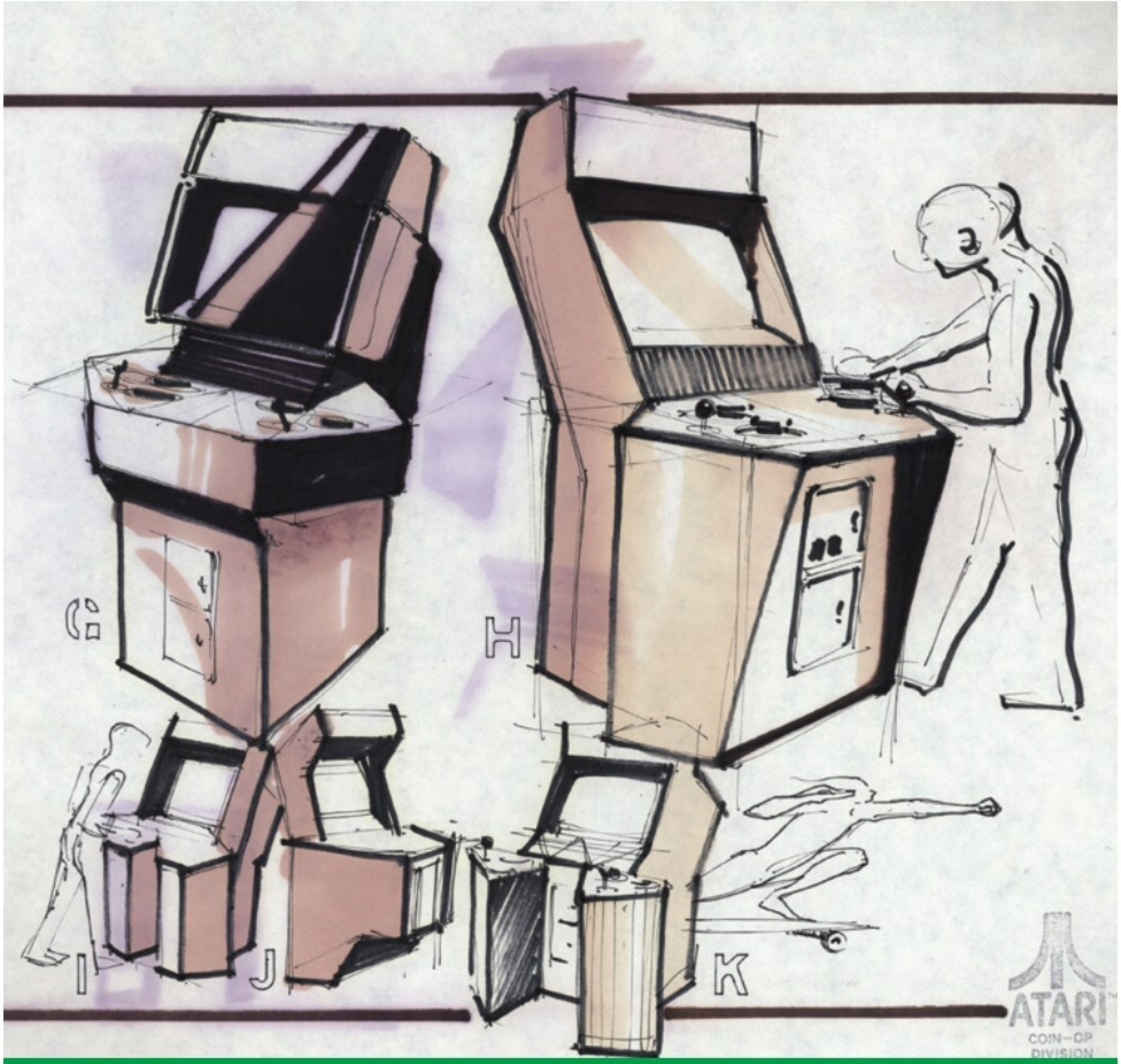


Nintendo NES Hands Free Controller (c.1989)

Long before Microsoft was experimenting with adaptive controllers for disabled players, Nintendo aimed to make gaming an inclusive hobby. In 1989, Nintendo released the Hands Free Controller, which was designed to allow paralytics and those with limited use of their hands to run and jump across the mushroom kingdom.

Nintendo's research and development team worked closely with kids at the Children's Orthopedic Hospital in Seattle to develop the Hands Free Controller. Nintendo envisioned that video games could be a good way to augment physical therapy. However, adapting the NES's relatively simple controls proved to be incredibly challenging, as many games required player to rapidly tap between the A and B buttons or hold one button down for a long period of time.

Nintendo's solution was a 2.5-pound device that would strap to its user's chest like a vest. Players controlled movements by moving a joystick with their chin, and the A and B buttons were replicated by sipping or puffing on a straw. Sipping or puffing with greater force would translate into the Select and Start buttons, and these pressure settings could be adjustable with a series of knobs and switches. The Hands Free Controller was sold as a non-profit item for $179, but it wasn't available in stores; users had to call Nintendo's customer service line to place an order. Today this device is exceedingly rare, but Nintendo donated a factory-condition unit to The Strong that still works.



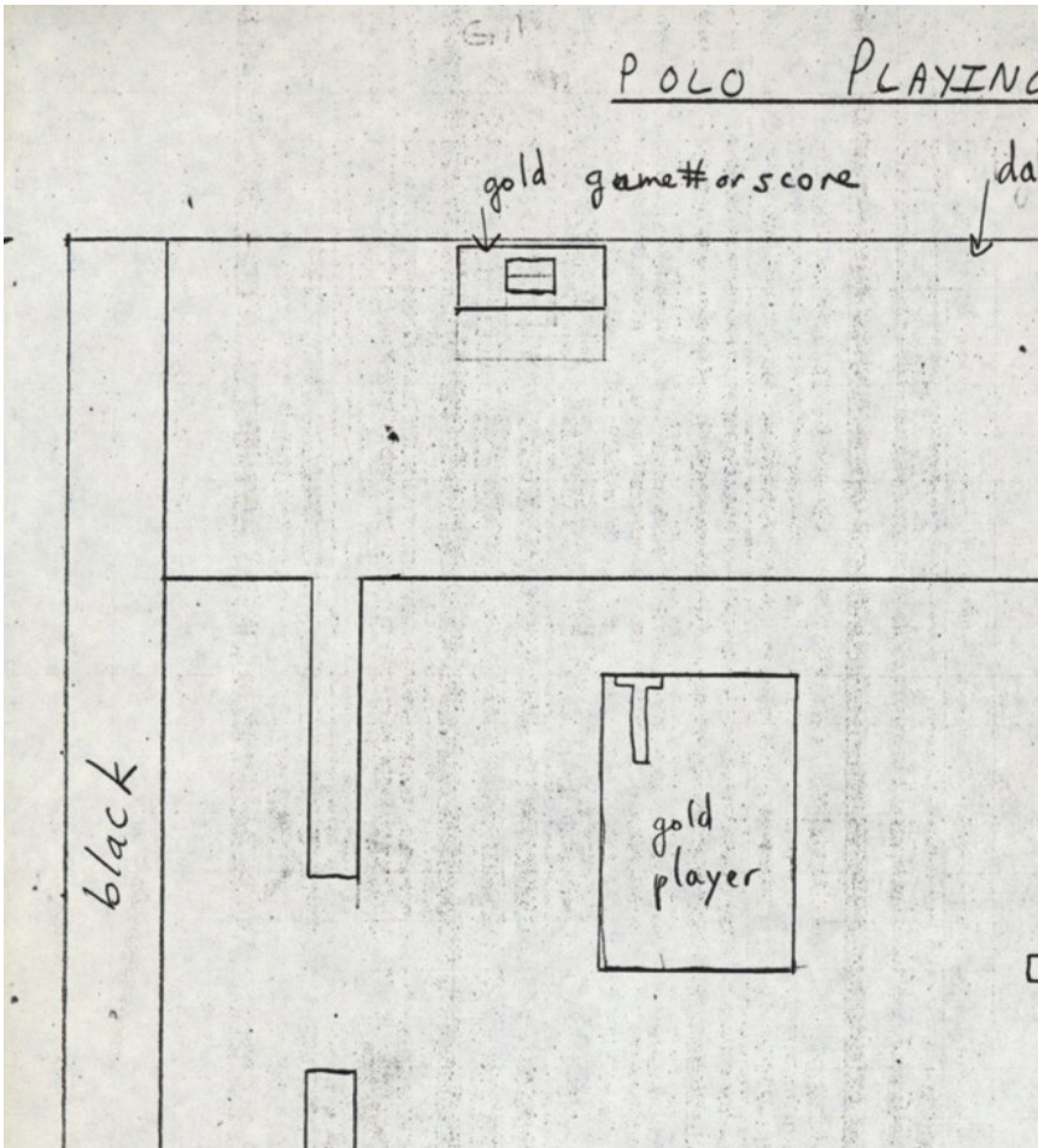
Atari's Street Fighter Schematics (c.1987)

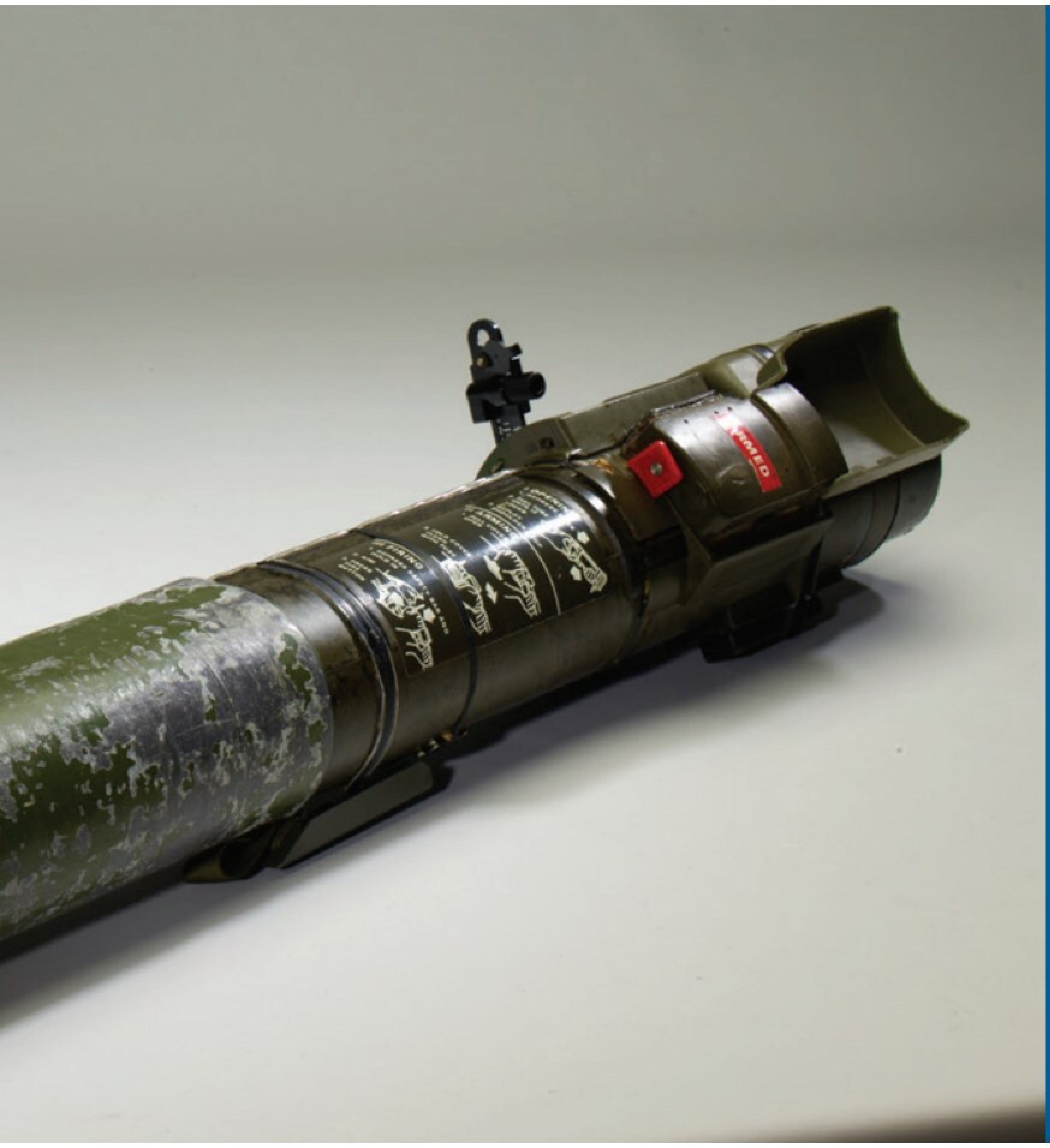
Street Fighter II revolutionized the arcade scene as well as the fighting genre, but people often overlook the original Street Fighter. This oversight isn't without reason. The original Street Fighter lacks the depth of later entries, its eight-direction joystick was somewhat unresponsive, and the series' iconic special moves were incredibly difficult to perform.

Before release, Capcom had high hopes for Street Fighter, but in the '80s, the publisher didn't have the infrastructure to bring its cabinets stateside. Instead, the company negotiated with Atari to produce Street Fighter cabinets in the U.S.. Atari's in-house designer Kenneth Hata produced dozens of sketches and schematics for various deluxe Street Fighter cabinets. Many of these schematics were never used, and only a handful of Atari cabinets were ever made.

Instead of a six-button layout, the original Street Fighter shipped with two oversized pneumatic buttons, called "bash pads." One button allowed your character to kick and the other performed a punch, but the harder a player hit these buttons the harder the character would attack.

"Obviously, some of these didn't make it out of prototyping," Saucier says. "When people played it, they smashed the hell out of the buttons and their hands hurt. Capcom didn't think it was going to sell well, so they moved to the six-button thing. The rest is, well, you know what happened to Street Fighter."





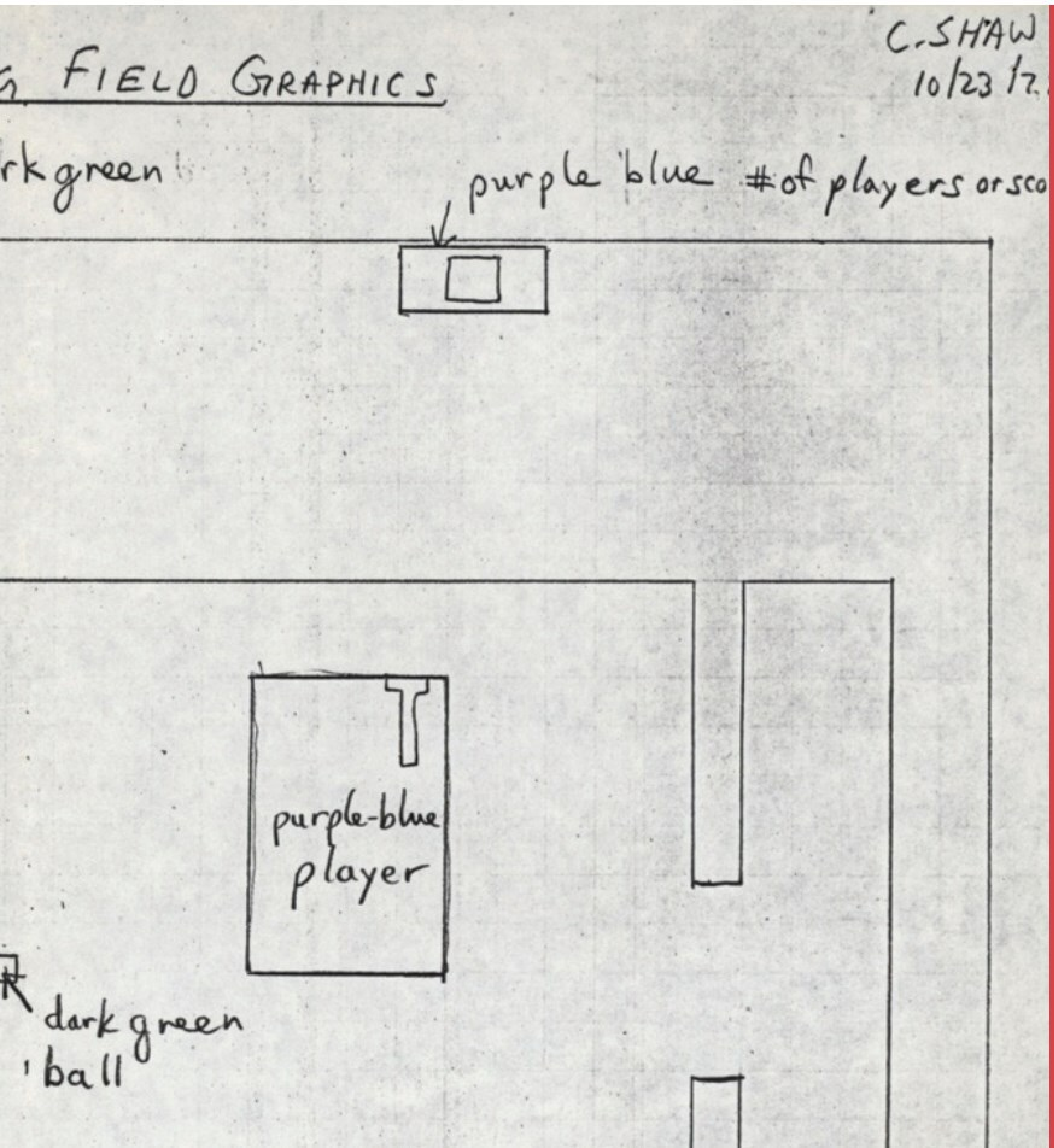
Ralph Baer's Prototype Light Anti-Tank Weapon (c.1979)

In 1967, Ralph Baer created The Brown Box and introduced the world to the concept of video games. Baer's work inventing the first digital ping-pong game as well as the electronic memory game Simon are well known. The engineer's work bringing video game technology to the military is less well-documented.

In the late '70s, Baer worked for a defense contractor called Sanders Associates. While developing a system to read optical sensors, Baer began tinkering with ways to improve military training regimens. Sensors of the day could accurately read white dots on black backgrounds, but Baer rigged up a system that used a modified anti-tank weapon that could recognize when a user aimed at stock footage of actual Russian tanks. Baer had effectively created a digital shooting gallery. While many game designers of the era were worried about how their software could be used for military purposes, Baer was unfazed.

"Ralph Baer had worked in the army," says vice president for exhibits Jon-Paul Dyson, Ph.D. "He had escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930s and came to America and served in the army. He was extremely patriotic. He saw the military as a source of tremendous good, protecting American freedoms. He was someone that was really grateful for the opportunities this country had given him, and he saw creating something like this as a way to give back. He saw it as helping the defender of liberty and democracy stay alive."

Weeks after its creation, Baer was flown out to the Pentagon, where he demonstrated his digital shooting gallery to the undersecretary of the U.S. Army alongside a two-star general. Sanders won its contract with the U.S. military, and Baer's light anti-tank prototype became the first known use of a video game for military training.



Source Code For Ralph Lauren's Polo (c.1978)

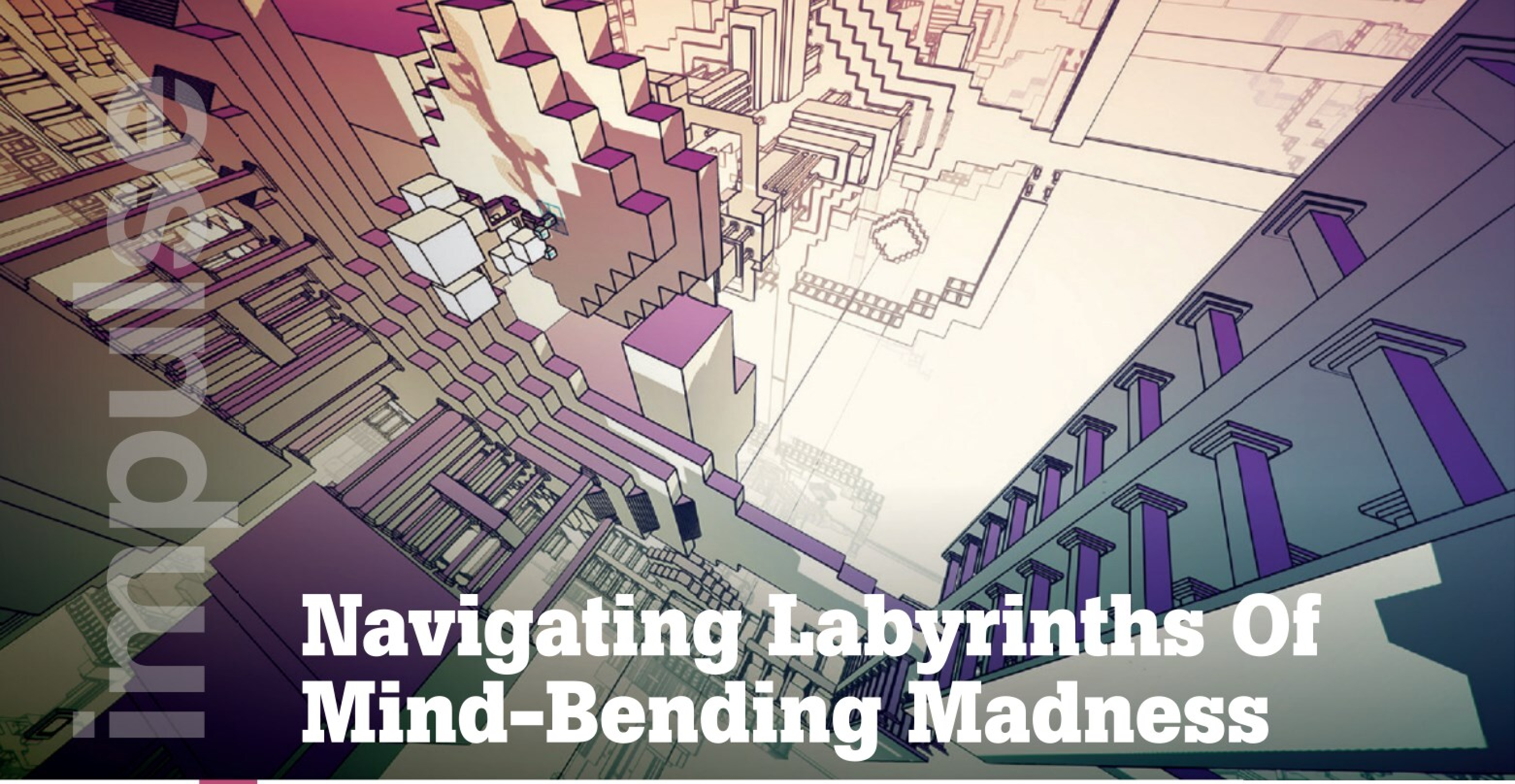
The first video game designed and programmed solely by a woman was canceled before release. Carol Shaw is one of the first female designers in the video game industry, and this brilliant computer science engineer created the hit Atari 2600 shooter River Raid. However, years before finding success, Shaw worked at Atari on a game based on a cologne.

"We actually have some letters that outline what they were envisioning," says curator and lead for the Women in Games Initiative Shannon Symonds. "Ralph Lauren wanted to have these wonderful displays of Ralph Lauren's Polo alongside the traditional photographs of polo players and samples of the cologne. Around that would have been an Atari that was playing this polo game."

For weeks, Shaw worked on developing a polo game that might appeal to Ralph Lauren's marketing department. She was extraordinarily meticulous. Inside her design documents are encyclopedic pages describing the sport, complex math formulas detailing the ball's physics, and pixel-by-pixel drawings of what the horses and the players would look like as they moved across the field.

"It's amazing to me that she had all of this documentation and such attention to detail for a game that was going to be on the Atari where the graphics wouldn't look anything close to realistic," Symonds says. "But she felt like she had to make it as realistic as possible."

When Ralph Lauren's plans for a display inside New York City's Bloomingdales fell through, the game was canceled. However, Carol Shaw's work eventually resurfaced years later. A modified version of the polo prototype was released in 1996 as part of the PC compilation disc Stella Gets a New Brain.



Navigating Labyrinths Of Mind-Bending Madness

There's nothing quite like a good brainteaser. The lows of being thwarted by a seemingly simple puzzle that's actually difficult giving way to the rush of victory once everything snaps into place is supremely satisfying. Well get ready, fellow sleuths, because there are several indies on the way that will throw riddles on top of astonishing, surreal vistas at you. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

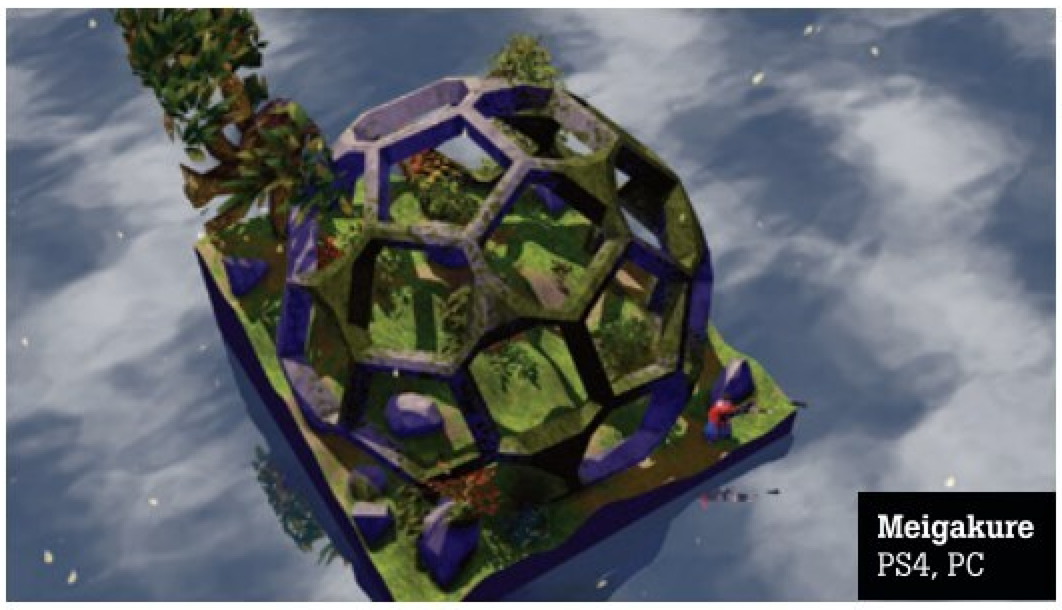
William Chyr's **Manifold Garden** (pictured above) is a wild ride through falling buildings in M.C. Escherland that might remind players of some of the wilder scenes from *Inception*. A puzzle-based game that deals with physics and lets players run up walls and play with gravity, Manifold Garden looks like it could offer a plethora of moments where the entire world literally shifts to your actions (or is it just your perspective? Is there a difference?). We know next to nothing about Mainfold Garden's story – if there is one – but we can't wait to to experience more of this puzzler's dizzying highs when it releases later this year on PS4 and PC.

Outbounds' **Memory Of A Broken Dimension** offers another twisted odyssey but one that's grittier and viscerally uncomfortable. The protagonist must explore a mysterious,bleak landscape inside some sort of broken machine. A short prototype is available to play and has already built a small following taken in by the dark environments, constantly scrambled by fuzzy visuals and high-pitched static. Though no release date for the full game is in sight, the demo's strong showing makes us intrigued by Outbounds' combination of first-person exploration and an atmosphere steeped in a dark world that also feels vibrant in spite of its grotesqueness.

Marc Ten Bosh's **Miegakure** is something of a legend now. In development since 2010, this "puzzle-platformer in four dimensions" has the player guiding the protagonist through a 3D space. At the press of the button, they can exchange one of those dimensions for the fourth one to go through walls and do other nifty things to solve puzzles in a limbo-esque garden. We've waited a long time for Miegakure and hope that we can experience its dimension-hopping on PS4 and PC soon. Bosh's last blog update stated all the puzzles are done and all that's left is a little clean up.

The Gardens Between is billed as a "surreal puzzle adventure" by developer The Voxel Agents and gameplay demoes showcase a title with lofty, twisted ambitions. Following two best friends who have fallen into a universe filled with surreal islands built out of massive household objects and other strange items, heroes Arina and Frendt must manipulate time to bypass obstacles and progress through their journey. One example of using this power includes 'rewinding' a massive Jenga tower that's fallen over to block your path back into into its place so you can proceed. The colorful aesthetic also makes The Gardens Between one of the prettiest looking indies around town, and we're curious to see what weird roads the duo travels down when the game releases later this year on PS4 and PC.

Memory of a Broken Dimension
PC



Meigakure
PS4, PC

The Gardens Between
PS4, PC

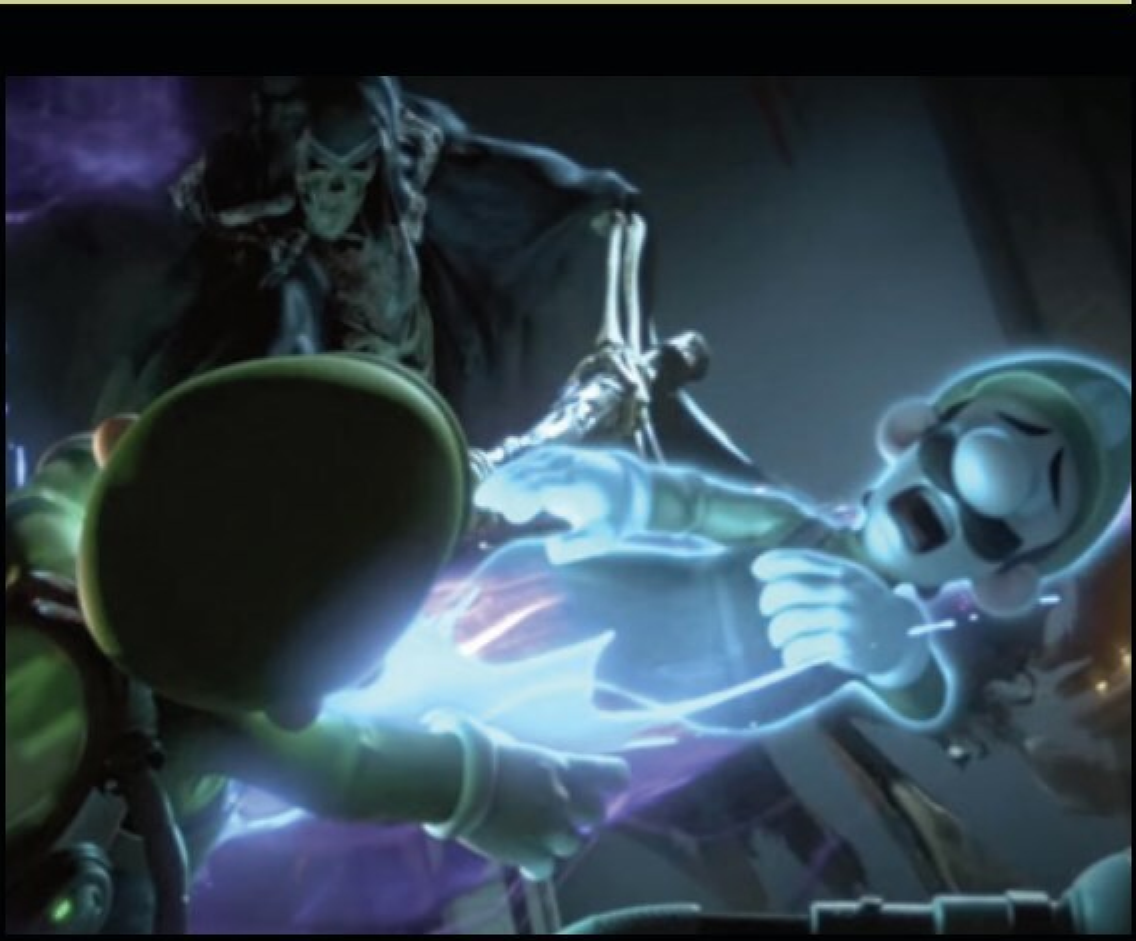
The Good

DIABLO III is coming to Switch, but that's not all Blizzard has in store. The company says there are multiple Diablo projects in the works, although they are in various stages of development at the moment. Blizzard says that more details could come by the end of the year.

The Bad

FORMER DICE CEO PATRICK SÖDERLUND is leaving Electronic Arts 12 years after the Swedish developer was acquired by EA. In the spring, Söderlund was dubbed EA's chief design officer, and before then he was executive vice president for EA's Worldwide Studios. During Söderlund's time with the company he made Battlefield's Frostbite engine technology the backbone of EA's development efforts moving forward and presided over less-popular moves such as the closing of Visceral Games, whose story-based Star Wars game is now in the process of becoming an open-world, games-as-service title.

The Ugly



Luigi is everyone's second-favorite plumber, but you don't have to kill the guy. **A RECENT SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE NINTENDO DIRECT PRESENTATION** showed Luigi being scythed down by Death itself, a ghostly form ripped from his corporeal body. Nintendo has since clarified that he's "okay," whatever that means. At the time of this writing, the speculation is this is all pointing to a new mode in the game, but we think there are easier ways to advertise than murder.

Quotable

"...Regarding remakes and re-releases of titles in our back catalog, we expect to explore these further with a variety of properties as a part of our strategy to utilize our library of IP."

Capcom teases during an investors conference.

Gaming Gets Heavy

A new podcast called Heavily Pixelated discusses video games' place in the hardship of life

Scott Jones has had a long and successful career in video games, both as a journalist for such publications as *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, and as a television host for *Electric Playground*. In 2014, he fell gravely ill with an infection that led to open-heart surgery, and ended up being hospitalized for an extended period. As he laid in the hospital bed reflecting on his life, he was overwhelmed with a gratefulness for the career he's had, and wanted to convey why games are so important to the masses. He created Heavily Pixelated, a podcast he calls "half Freudian-style therapy and half a celebration of video games." I talked to Jones about the creation of this heartfelt show, and where he hopes to take it next.

by Andrew Reiner

Where did the idea for Heavily Pixelated come from?

I made the podcast because I'm a big fan of them. I think I spend an hour a day listening to them. I've always been disappointed with what's out there for gaming podcasts. They are always emotional arguments about the graphics in God of War versus the graphics in Zelda and why one is better than the other. I'm almost 50 years old. I've been working in this industry for 20 years. I'm tired of that. Gamers are mature now. We're all grown up with kids and families, and we've got responsibilities like mortgage payments and taxes to file. I felt like I was ready for a more mature podcast. I wanted to make that. Although, I thought I would be the only one who is interested in listening to this. I just started looking around for stories that would fit the imagined model of it.

When did you have that eureka moment of "This is it? This is the backbone of my show"?

I got lucky out of the gate. The first story that fell into my lap, a guy who is a filmmaker here in Toronto trusted me enough with his story. He basically told me that he was sad that his grandmother had died, and that he played Mass Effect and that made him feel better. I was editing that, and he announced on social media that he was coming out as transgender. I remembered our discussion about Mass Effect and him talking about the fact that he played it as a woman, the entire trilogy. I felt his first version of his new identity was created in Mass Effect. I said, "Can we get together and do this interview again?" and she, to her credit, said yes. I thought the story was incredibly moving. It was a very complicated and challenging story for me to tell properly. I just wanted to give an honest interpretation of her story. I also gained a greater appreciation of games after this. Games really do change people's lives. I really do believe that after the experiences I've had making this show.

Have games changed your life in any way?

Games have far more leverage and power than we usually give them credit for. Games have gotten me through my own difficult times. Maybe it was just general abstract loneliness or trying to figure out my future self and who I wanted to be. Games are sort of the thing that made those difficult times more bearable. Games also have elements in their stories and gameplay that are relevant to me. All of a sudden, I was making a show that had far more weight than I ever thought I would.

You aren't just sharing people's stories about the games they have an appreciation for. You're sometimes connecting them with the game's creators.

It's a moment for them to say "thank you" to the people that made the games. Part of the ability to do that is my long history in games and getting to know people in the industry. I had Todd Howard on, and Mark Noseworthy from Bungie. Connecting these people with the people that made the things that have meant so much to them is such a terrific moment. You don't get a lot of time out of Todd Howard; he's making very important things, but the fact that he said yes and did it is important. As we get older, we need to say "thank you" for the things we like. We don't do that nearly enough.

You have four episodes out now. What is your plan moving forward?

Now that the show is out, I have been getting almost hourly emails from people who want to be on the show, who say games have helped them get through tough times. At this point, I feel like it's a weird moment in time for podcasts. Everyone is horny for them. Suddenly it's really en vogue right now.

I am still paying for [Heavily Pixelated] out of my own pocket. It's a relatively low cost, but what I am spending money on is traveling around, gathering interviews for the next batch of shows. I have a few more lined up right now. Maybe it's naïve of me and I'll be out of business in a few weeks, but I really want the intimacy that comes from meeting these people. I don't know how long I can do that. I want to do this, and don't want to work on consulting, which has been gratifying for a number of reasons, but I want to keep the show moving in a healthy direction and keep it fresh. I hope to release another four or five episodes. I feel like I can do 10 episodes annually.

How can people contact you if they have stories to tell? Any guidelines they should follow?

I have a Patreon. The best way to deliver a pitch, for me, is if you shoot me an email with a few sentences about your story at scj@me.com. The other thing you can do: We all have smart phones now, with the voice memo app. You can record yourself with that. If you have a great story and really believe in it, talk very closely to the bottom of your phone and spell out your story in the simplest way. Tell me what happened to you, how you are doing, and what game helped you get through it. ◆

You can find Heavily Pixelated at scottcjones.com/heavilypixelated, Apple Podcasts, and Google Play

DEAD CELLS

Death comes quickly in roguelikes, and progress is often made by the seat of your pants. Dead Cells embraces these elements, but also rewards the player well for their time spent with power boosts that make subsequent runs easier. We talked to Sébastien Bénard, a game designer at Motion Twin, about Dead Cells' surprising origins, how the community helped shape it, and whether or not we can expect a sequel.

by Andrew Reiner

From the outset of development, did you always see Dead Cells as a roguelike, or did that aspect emerge over time?
No, it definitely wasn't something we envisioned. The first version used to be a free-to-play tower defense game for mobile. It's really not the same thing.

How did you transition from a free-to-player tower defense formula to the Metroidvania roguelike we see today? Those seem like two radically different designs.
Actually, it was quite a chaotic process. At the beginning, the first version of this game, which used to be called Hordes Zero, was started like three or four years ago. We had lots of issues with it because it wasn't fun, especially for that type of game. We struggled with this for quite a long time, until a friend at a different company told us that a prototype section we made was more entertaining than the actual game. It was a realization for us because we understood we should focus on the single-player experience first, instead of making it multiplayer or that game. From this point, it was a matter of cutting a lot of elements from the original project. We gave up everything that was related to tower defense, and went in the direction of a platformer like Metroidvania instead.

How difficult of a decision is that to scrap a large chunk of a project that you've vested years of development into?
It was not a difficult process, because we have quite a bit of experience with projects we decided to transform into something else. Even if you have a clear idea of the game when you start making it, sometimes it's just not as much fun as you hoped. For this one, when we decided to drop everything we knew we were moving onto something more focused and more simple. It was more a relief than a difficult decision.

Roguelikes are often punishing in difficulty. Dead Cells is a little friendlier in how it handles that element. Can you talk about the balance you struck?
That's something that took quite a long time. We knew at the beginning we wanted something difficult, but not unfair. This idea was something we kept from the beginning. For example, when you are talking about combat, it's a matter of making the player know what happened to them. In games, when you get killed for no reason or can't understand why, we tried to avoid that. You need to know why it was your fault.

You have a great art style and the world seems interesting. Why did you steer away from a central story?
We wanted to have some narrative aspects, but not much. It's an action game and a roguelike. We didn't want to stick a story in there that wasn't fitting. We think it gets in the way. We don't want players spending too much time reading things. Additionally, most of the time in action games, when you have lots of cinematics, you just want to skip them and get back to the combat.

Out of all of the games that hit Early Access, Dead Cells seemed polished, fairly complete, and the vision was locked in stone. Did you learn anything from launching that early version, or was it just to get players excited for the final game?
We definitely learned a lot. It was our very first PC and Steam game. We weren't exactly confident when we went to Early Access. We also hit at a point where it didn't seem like a good time to go on Steam. As soon as we hit, though, we were very surprised by the community that developed. Players understood what we were doing with the game. It was really interesting because players understood what was good for the game and what wasn't. At the beginning, we were thinking it would be 80 percent of ideas from us, and 20 percent from the community, but actually we understood it was 50/50. We had our vision, but got lots of suggestions for balancing that came from the community. It was a surprise for us.

You have a big community behind Dead Cells, but Motion Twin rarely does sequels. What is next for the team? Most studios would likely green light a sequel given its success.
We have two big things we are working on for Dead Cells after the Twitch integration. We are now working on supporting the modding community for the game. We want to make sure the community could modify the game in a deep way, and hopefully create modes and items in the future. Modding is a big part of what is next. We are also working on DLC for the game that includes new bosses, items, and areas.

In terms of a sequel, we know for sure it's not a good idea to dwell on your success. If you create a big hit, it's best to use this energy to make something different. I don't think we'll make a Dead Cells 2. We're more open to creating more content and opening the game up more to the community. If we did make a Dead Cells 2, it's because we really need the money (laughs). We don't want to stick to the same thing though, so I think if we did come back it would be something quite different, not a platformer or roguelike along these lines. ◆

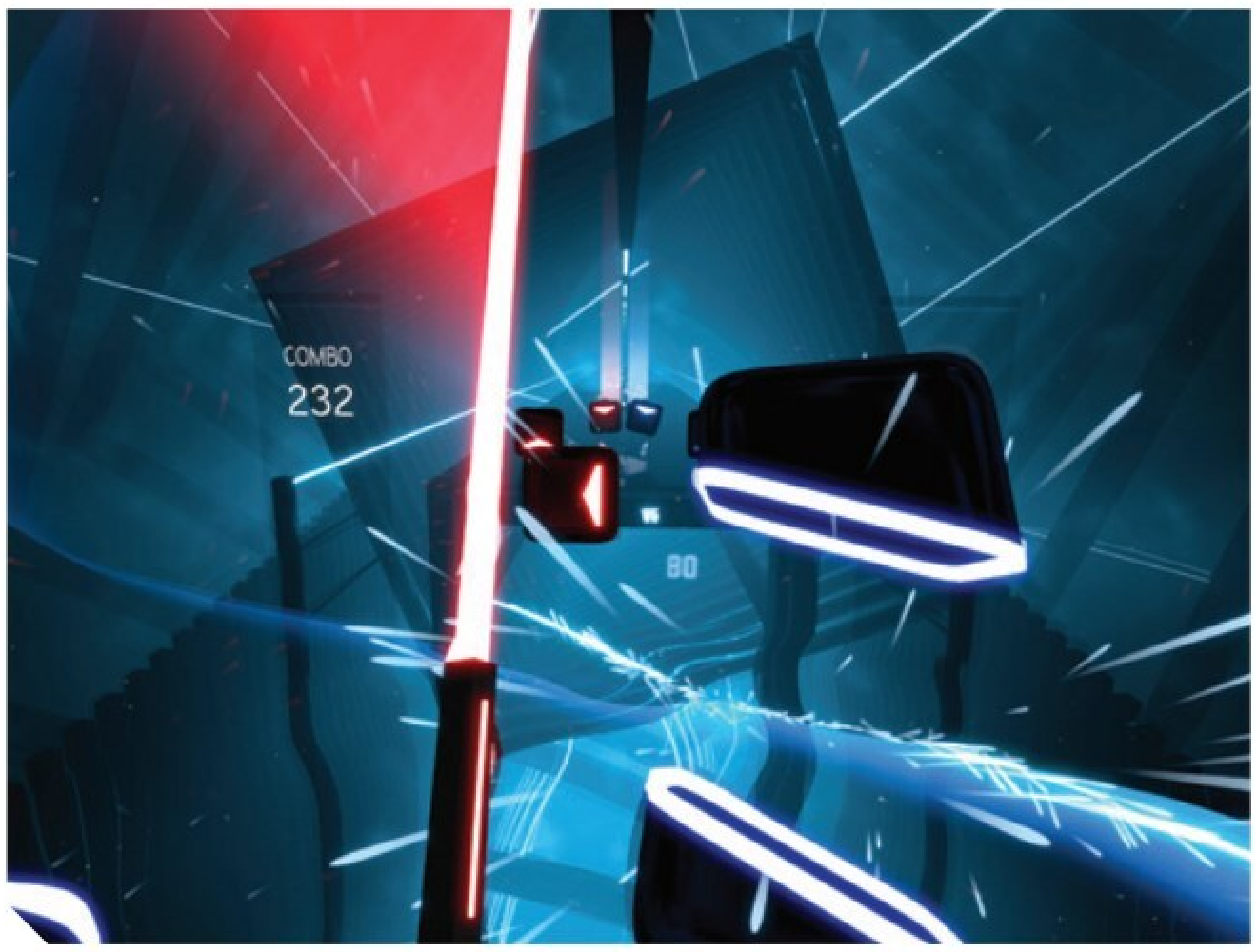
A NEWCOMER'S GUIDE TO VIRTUAL REALITY GAMES

Virtual reality has yet to take hold of our society the way many predicted it would, but there are still fun experiences to be had if you're new to the platform.

by Kyle Hilliard

In 2016, three major players in the world of virtual reality released hardware – the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, Sony PlayStation VR. In the two years since, virtual reality has experienced some growing pains, but over that time the platforms have steadily gathered more fully-featured games that can only be experienced in virtual reality.

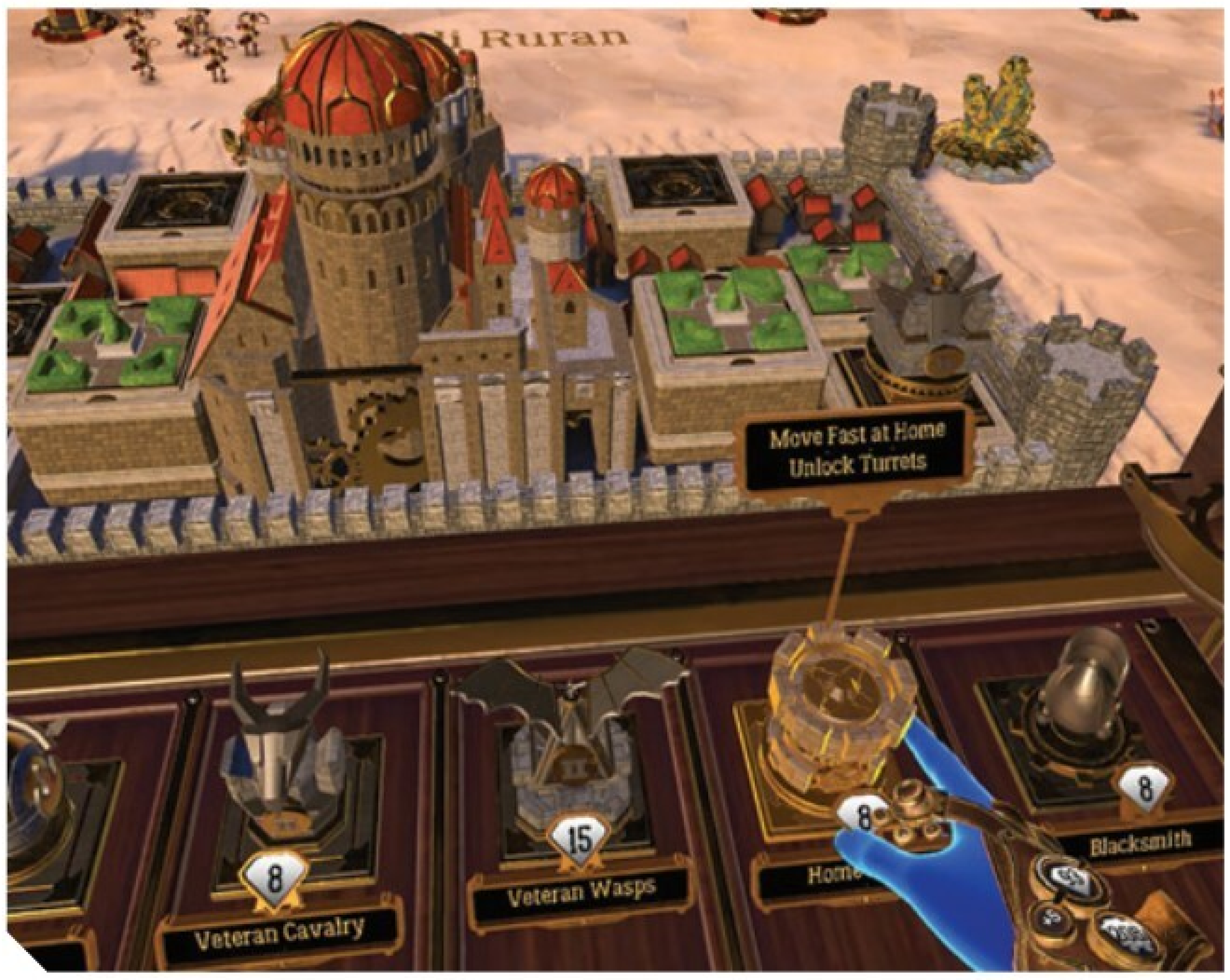
If you're curious about the budding platform, or have recently decided to dive into the world of virtual reality, here are our suggestions of experiences worth seeking out so far and a collection of games we're excited to play in the future.



BEAT SABER

Platform: *PSVR (coming soon), Rift, Vive*

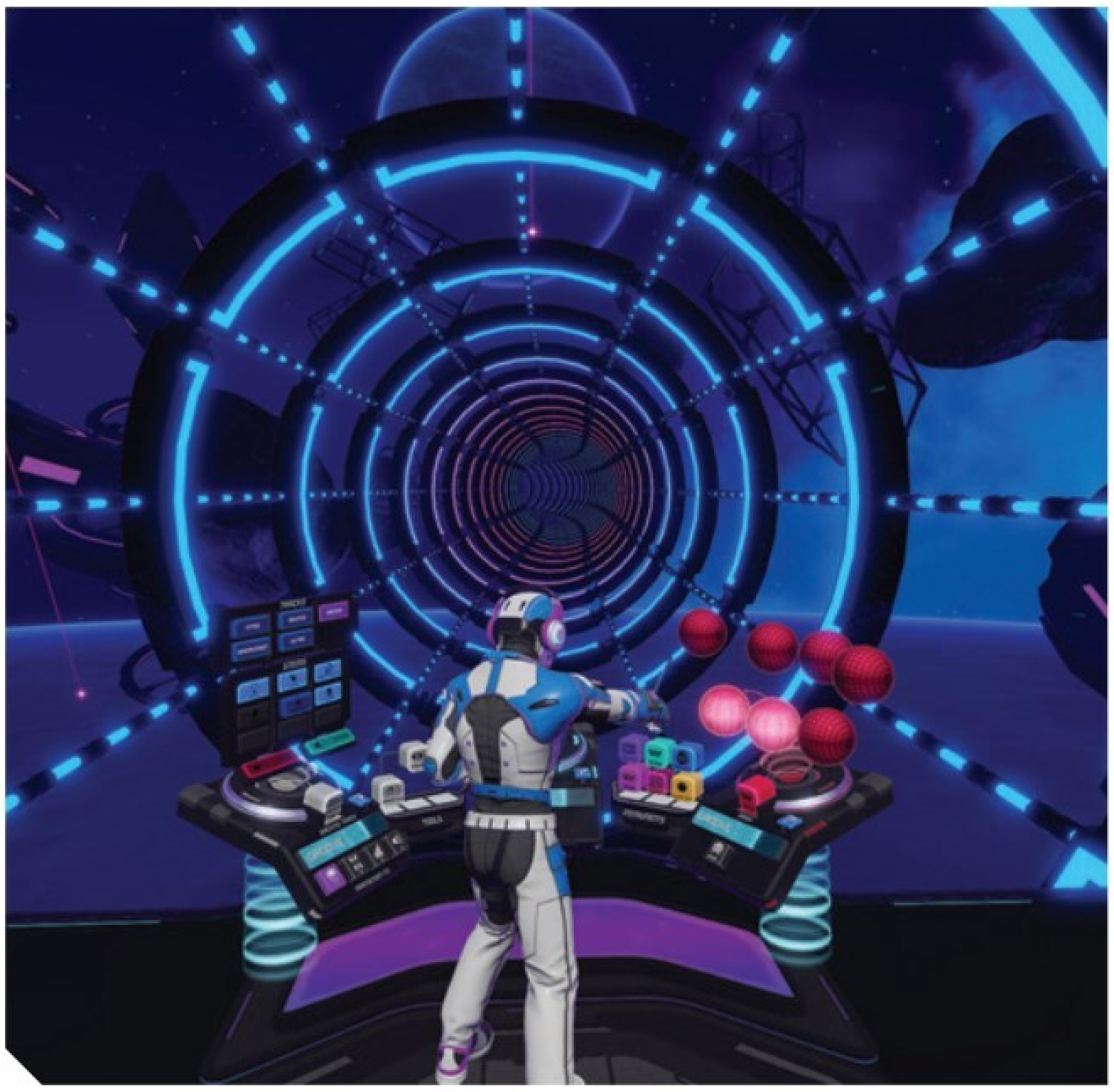
This is an alphabetical list, but even if it weren't Beat Saber would sit at the top as my prime virtual reality recommendation. Beat Saber is a rhythm game where the player stands still while blue and red blocks with arrows on them fly at the player in sync with music. In one hand you have what is essentially a blue lightsaber and in the other you have a red lightsaber. As the arrowed blocks fly at you, you must swipe through them with the appropriately colored saber. The concept immediately makes sense once you pick up the controllers, it's easy to get enveloped in the music, and you essentially attack the music with lightsabers. It's awesome. Beat Saber is in Early Access and as a result doesn't have too many songs, but the core mechanic is so fun that it's worth having in your library.



BRASS TACTICS

Platform: *Rift*

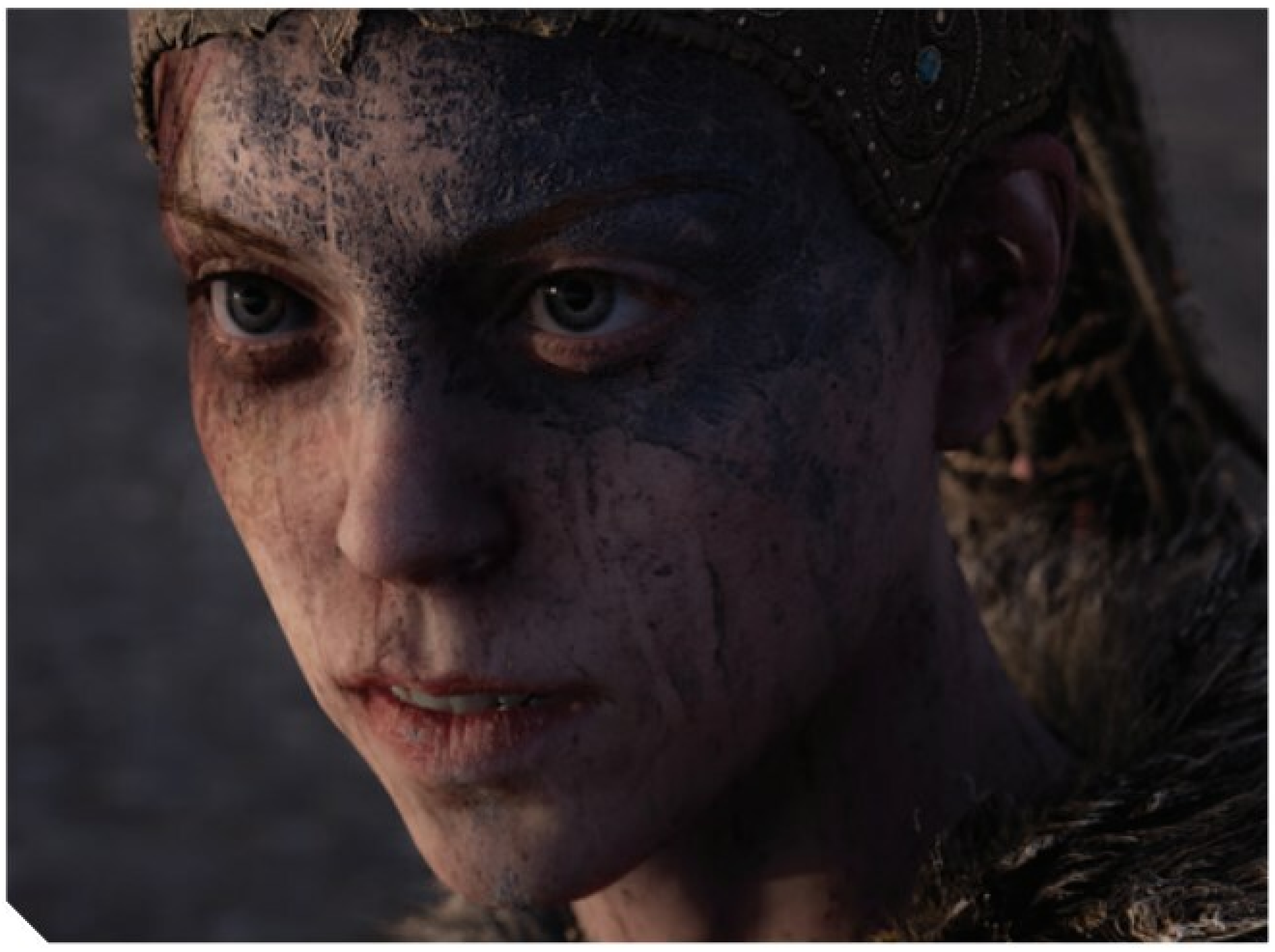
Brass Tactics is a strategy game where the battle takes place on a large table. You can grab troops and direct them toward specific locations, place units on the table, and lean in for a closer look at the action. One particular highlight is upgrading your home base, which involves standing behind your castle, reaching into a drawer to grab your upgrade, and placing it in your courtyard as though you were physically placing an object on a table. Movement in virtual reality is always tricky, but Brass Tactics succeeds by letting the player essentially drag themselves across the battlefield with their hands. It's also easy to raise yourself to get a broader view or lower yourself to get up close and personal.



ELECTRONAUTS

Platform: *PSVR, Rift, Vive*

Electronuats is not a game in the traditional sense. Instead, it's a music creator that focuses its efforts on the EDM genre. Trippy visuals that have you flying through space accompany simple music creation tools, which let you craft tunes from a collection of licensed base tracks. Standing in front of a dashboard of tools, you use your controllers like drum sticks to interact with globes and assorted meters to change the sound. You can also change the camera perspective of the outgoing video feed so those watching/listening can experience your music as though you are a DJ delivering a set.



HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE VR EDITION

Platform: *Vive*

From the developers of Heavenly Sword and DmC: Devil May Cry, Hellblade is a third-person action game about Senua, a Celtic woman struggling with psychosis as she attempts to save the soul of her dead lover. The adventure to Helheim is difficult, but not in the traditional video game sense as players hear the voices that constantly plague Senua's subconscious and get an intimate picture of her mental struggles. Despite not being developed as a VR game, the experience is well-suited to the format with some caveats. Exploration and combat work well, and the story moments when Senua looks into the players' eyes are made all the more intense by the VR experience. Most of the cutscenes occur as though you're watching a screen in a 3D space, which isn't ideal. It's a little like watching a film in IMAX where only a select few scenes were actually shot in the larger format. Despite this, Hellblade is improved in virtual reality – just be prepared for a dark, affecting experience.

Looking Toward The Future

Check out some intriguing VR games still on the horizon

Defector

Platform: Rift
Release: Fall

This James Bond-style spy thriller video game cranks the action up to absurd levels. The dialogue takes the simulation seriously, which is surprising coming from the creators of games like 'Splosion Man and Lococycle, but Defector is packed with crazy spy gadgets like night vision contacts and movie moments like blasting jets out of the sky with powerful machine gun from the open doors of an airplane.

Déraciné

Platform: PSVR
Release: 2018

From Software and Hidetaka Miyazaki have found phenomenal success with Dark Souls and Bloodborne, but for its first VR experience, it is slowing things down and making it less lethal. You play as a fairy on a mission to convince humans you are real by manipulating the world around you.

Gungrave VR

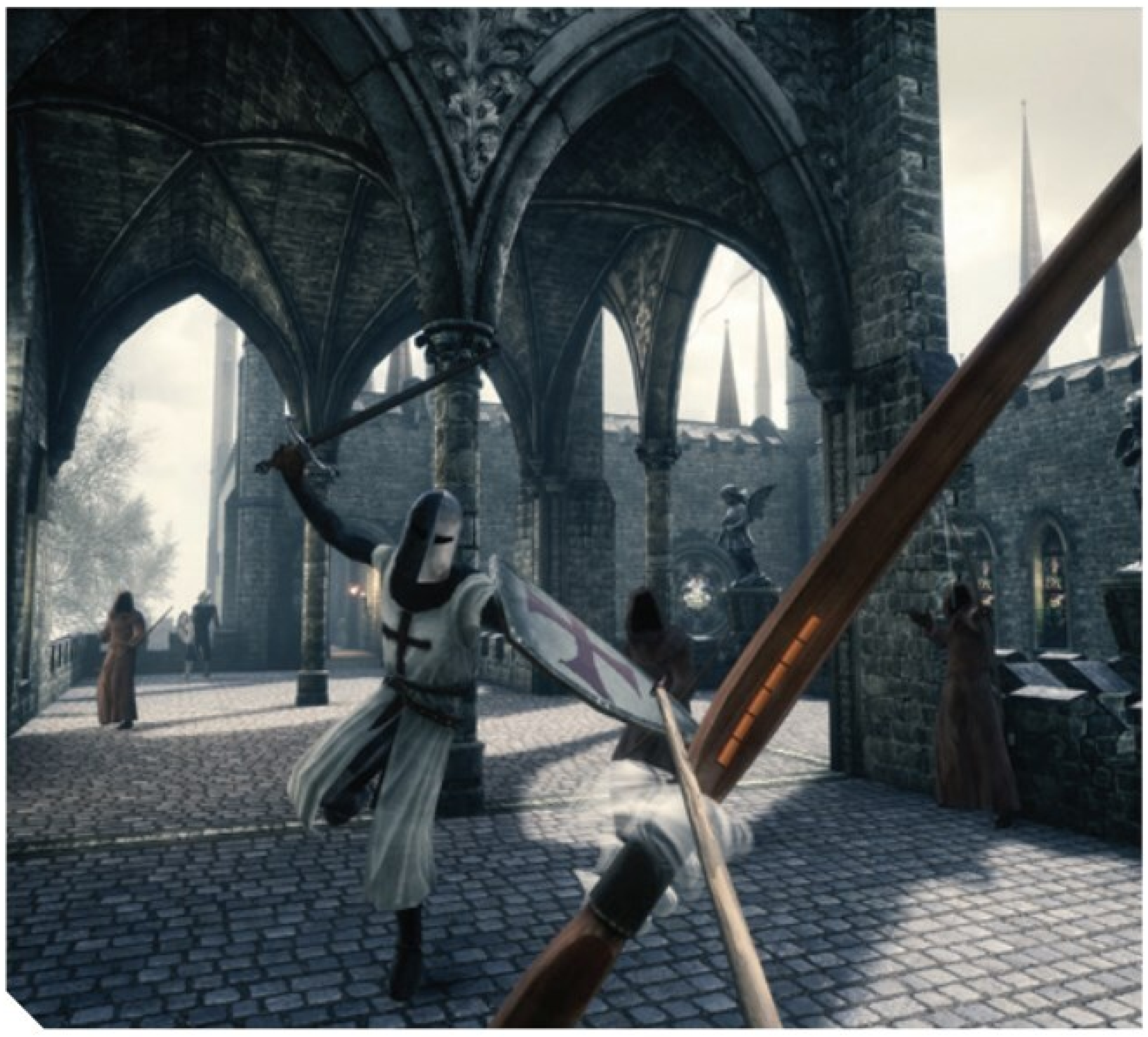
Platform: PSVR
Release: 2019

Gungrave began as a fairly forgettable PlayStation 2 game. It boasted some cool character designs from Yasuhiro Nightow, the creator of Trigun, and… not much else. Despite this underwhelming legacy, the VR game is exciting because the mechanics of the original game, which involved standing still and shooting, works well in a VR setting. We were surprised by our hands-on time with the game at E3 and are eager to play more.

Echo Combat

Platform: Rift, Vive
Release: TBA

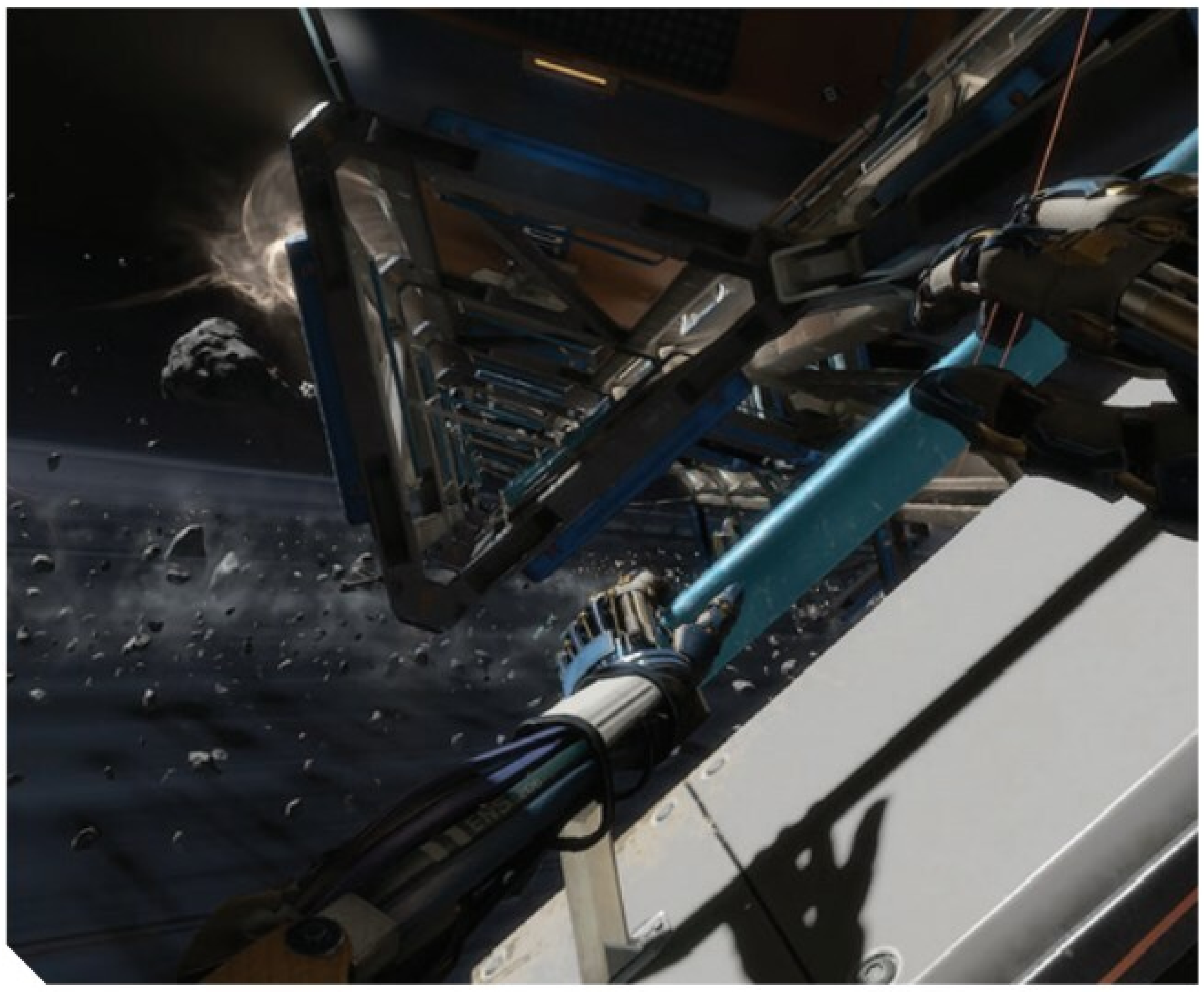
Developer Ready at Dawn is on to something with its Echo trilogy, and the next entry to use its zero-gravity movement mechanics is a team-based shooter. We played the game at E3 and had an intense time ducking in and out of cover to fire off shots at opponents guarding the payload, which happens to look like a giant robot chicken.



IN DEATH

***Platform:** Rift, Vive*

In Death is a roguelite with procedurally generated levels that takes place in a mysterious medieval afterlife. Armed with a bow and arrow, firing one type of arrow zips you directly to the spot, while firing another type does damage to your enemies. You can also toss a mythical blade to quickly relocate if nocking and shooting an arrow takes too long. Firing the bow is satisfying, and you can also throw up a shield to block incoming arrows. Surveying the environment, you can also find other types of arrows with magical properties like freezing your enemies. The action is fast, movement feels good, and watching your achievement totals tick up at the start of each round makes it very easy to give it just one more shot late into the night.



LONE ECHO

***Platform:** Rift*

One of the hardest things for developers to master in virtual reality is movement. Pushing forward on a control stick to make your character walk forward has the potential to induce nausea, and teleporting around a world, though effective at preventing you from feeling ill, feels unnatural and weird. One of the reasons Lone Echo is so interesting is because of the way it simulates movement. Floating in a zero-gravity environment, you grab onto the walls and pull yourself along, or use jets on your wrists to propel yourself forward, and it feels great. This interesting movement mechanic is used to tell a science-fiction story about a robot and a human investigating a strange anomaly in space. This game also includes Echo Arena (which is also sold separately), a sports game like the Ender's Game battle room that uses the interesting zero-gravity movement.

Stormland

Platform: Rift
Release: 2019

Insomniac previously delivered the standout Rift title Edge of Nowhere, a cerebral horror game about exploring Antarctica while slowly losing your mind. For its next big VR project, the studio puts players in the role of an abandoned robot on an alien world. It looks a bit like Wall-E, if Wall-E had guns to protect himself from a dangerous corporation.

Tetris Effect

Platform: PSVR, Vive
Release: Fall

There are plenty of reasons to be extra excited about this VR adaptation of one of the best games ever made. Tetsuya Mizuguchi, the creator of Rez (another great VR game, by the way), is lending his expert musical taste and penchant for abstract visualizers to the experience. It's a new and exciting way to experience the classic puzzle game.

Transference

Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive
Release: Fall

Developed with the involvement of actor/video games aficionado Elijah Wood, Transference follows a troubled family inside of a simulation. You see through the eyes of the assorted family members, experiencing layers of their memories similar to how dreams are experienced in the movie Inception. The live-action storytelling has us a little concerned, but we're curious to play more after only getting a small playable taste.

Trover Saves The Universe

Platform: PSVR
Release: TBA

Revealed with a bizarre trailer of a man sitting in a tub calling himself bathtub guy, Trover Saves the Universe comes from the twisted mind of Rick and Morty co-creator Justin Roiland. An outspoken supporter of VR since the latest headsets started to become available, Roiland has stated in the past that he would like to make VR games that are comparable to triple-A experiences. It's unclear exactly what Trover is or if it will be an experience on that level, but we're intrigued.

MOSS

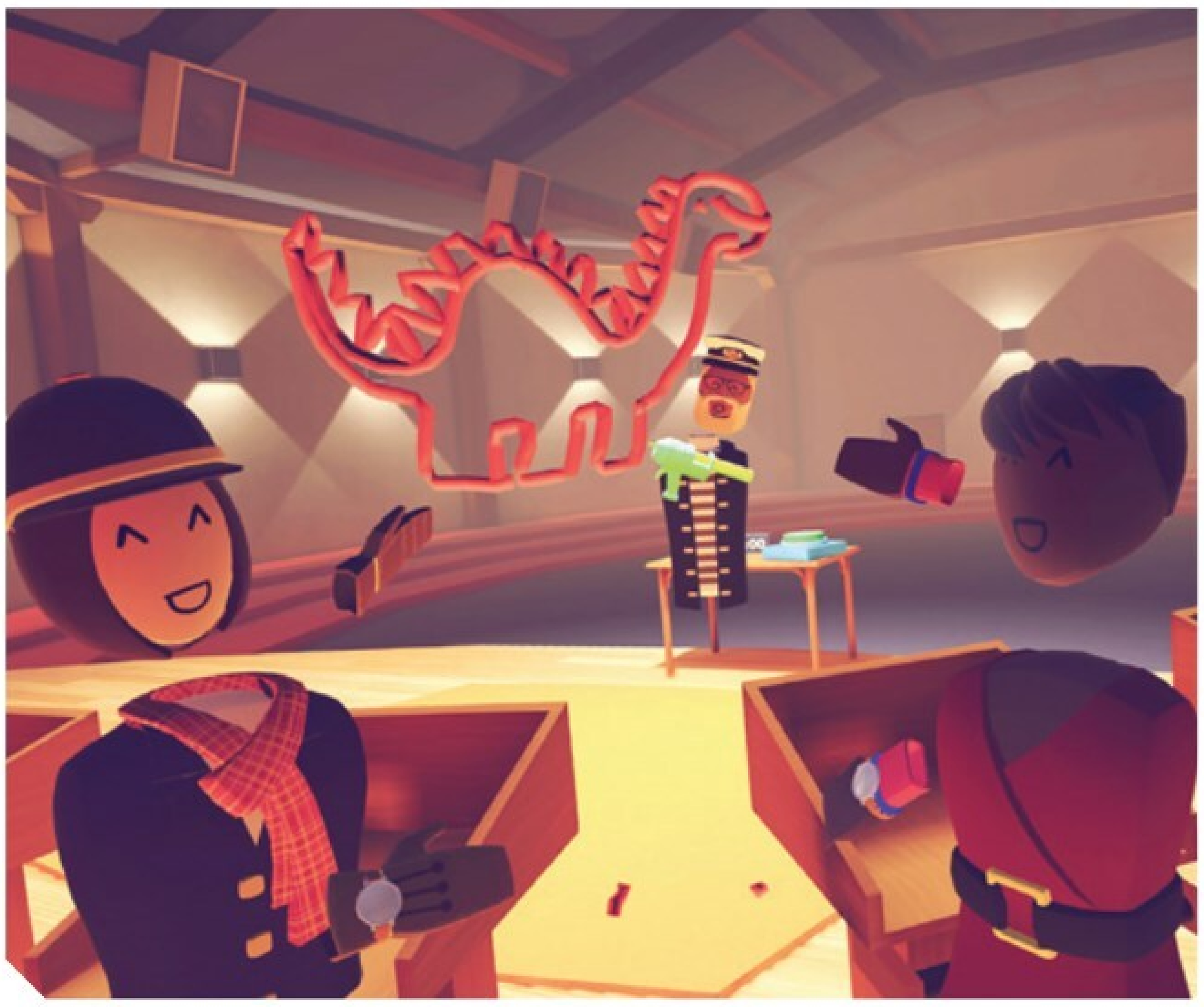
Platform: *PSVR, Rift, Vive*

This third-person action platformer is reminiscent of Brian Jacques' Redwall novels in the way it personifies animals in a fantasy setting. You control Quill, a mouse who discovers a magical artifact and must save her kidnapped uncle. The way the player hovers above the mouse during gameplay is unique and Quill has some of my favorite character animation in years. Solving puzzles, fighting enemies, and platforming all feel great, and the ability to look around the environment in VR makes exploring the world feel different from comparable games. The story is also worth seeing to its conclusion, as it lays the groundwork for follow-up entries in the Moss series.

ONWARD

Platform: *Rift, Vive*

Its visuals are underwhelming, but Onward is a well-executed competitive military shooter simulation. Landing shots on your target requires steady aim given the game's commitment to realism, but coordinating with fellow players is intense and exciting. In the middle of one match a sandstorm kicked up as my partner and I were making our way toward the objective. He stopped me and said, "From here on out, I am just going to use hand signals so the enemy won't hear us." I nodded in compliance and followed as he waived me forward, physically crouching in my play space to avoid being spotted. The game is rough around the edges, but developer Downpour Interactive has been frequently updating it since release, and moments like the one outlined above really sell the simulation. As an added bonus, the community is pleasant and helpful.



REC ROOM

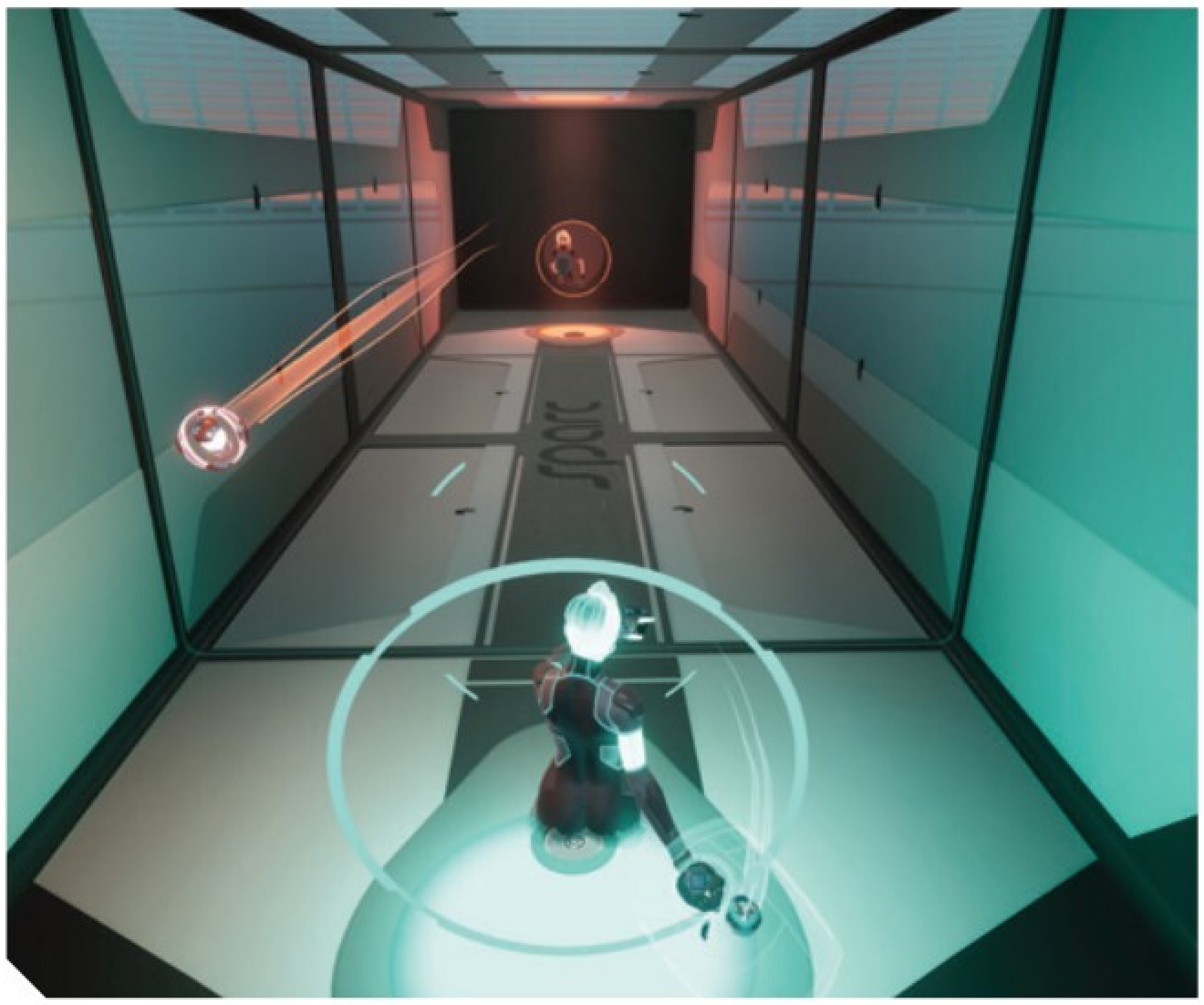
Platform: *PSVR, Rift, Vive*

One of a few Early Access titles on this list, Rec Room is essentially a free-to-play community center. The lobby area provides fun on its own, where you can play with assorted toys with other online players. You can also venture into soccer, disc golf, dodgeball, paintball, and zero-gravity paddleball games. Rec Room has more abstract modes as well, like 3D Charades that lets players draw things in 3D space while other players try to guess what you're trying to represent, and Quest, a four-player cooperative series of missions complete with weapons and enemies. Rec Royale was also recently added, in which up to 16 players can compete to be the last person standing in a virtual space.

ROBO RECALL

Platform: *Rift*

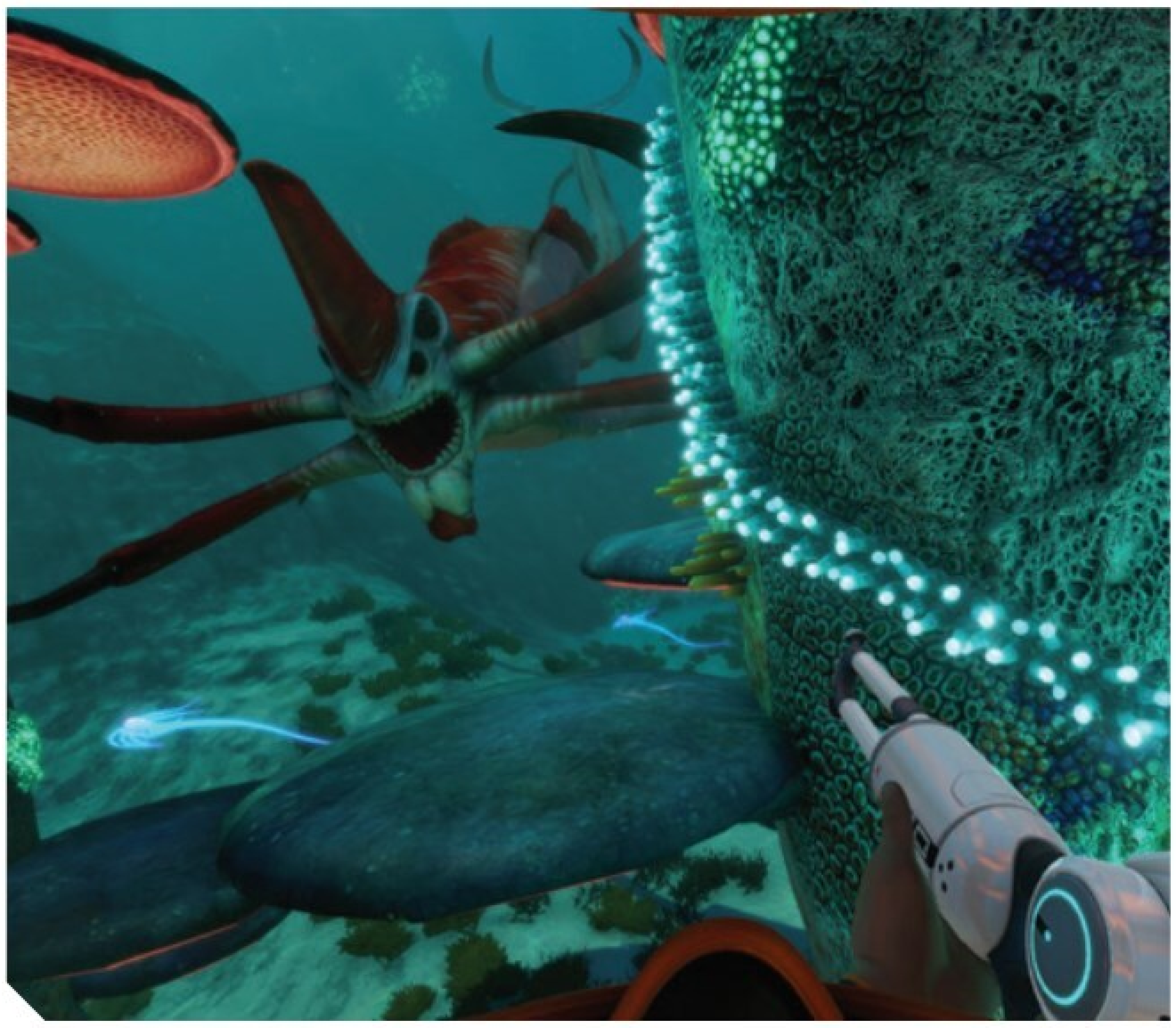
In a non-descript future city where service robots take up arms against humans, you, a robot yourself, are the only line of defense. You must "recall" all the unruly robots, which is just another term for destroying them. To accomplish your goal you have a full arsenal of guns, but you can also use your bare robot hands to rip them apart, toss them around, or even catch bullets out of the air to return back at your enemies at lethal speed. Robo Recall is fast, arcade-y, gorgeous (it's developed by Epic, the creators of the Unreal engine), fun, and has a great sense of humor. The mastery you can attain over the battlefield with some practice is impressive and makes seeking out a high score a worthy endeavor.



SPARC

***Platform:** PSVR, Rift, Vive*

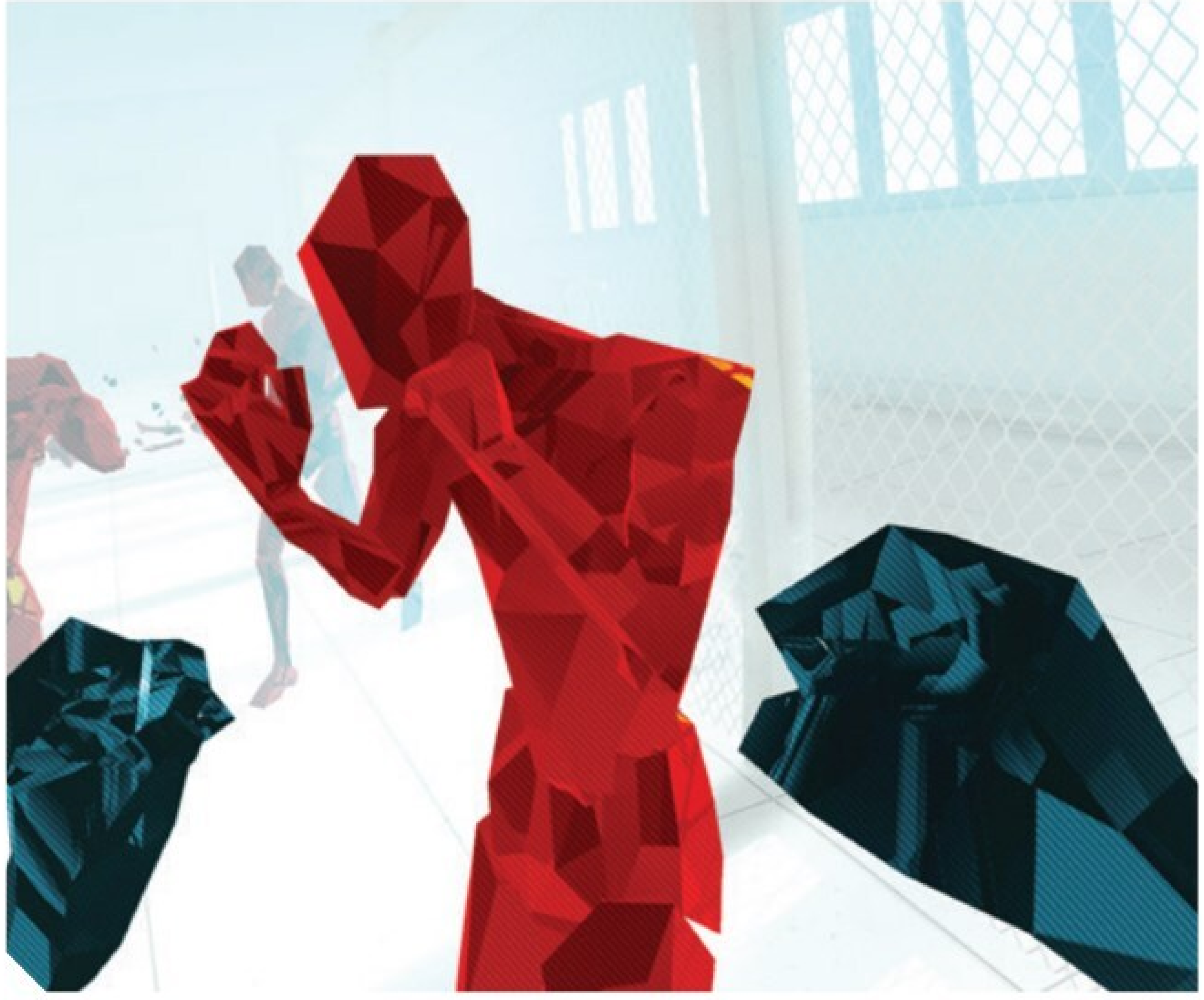
The film Tron features a game where two competitors throw lethal discs at one another in a racquetball-like court. Sparc emulates that experience in a video game. Instead of discs you have a ball, but the general concept is the same. You must bounce the ball against the walls, floor, and ceiling in order to get it past your opponent and into their goal. You also have a shield to defend yourself and bounce the ball back at your opponent. Getting a good volley going is intense and energetic. It takes some time to get the hang of throwing the ball, and it requires real-world stamina, but it's a sports video game experience unlike anything out there.



SUBNAUTICA

***Platform:** Rift, Vive*

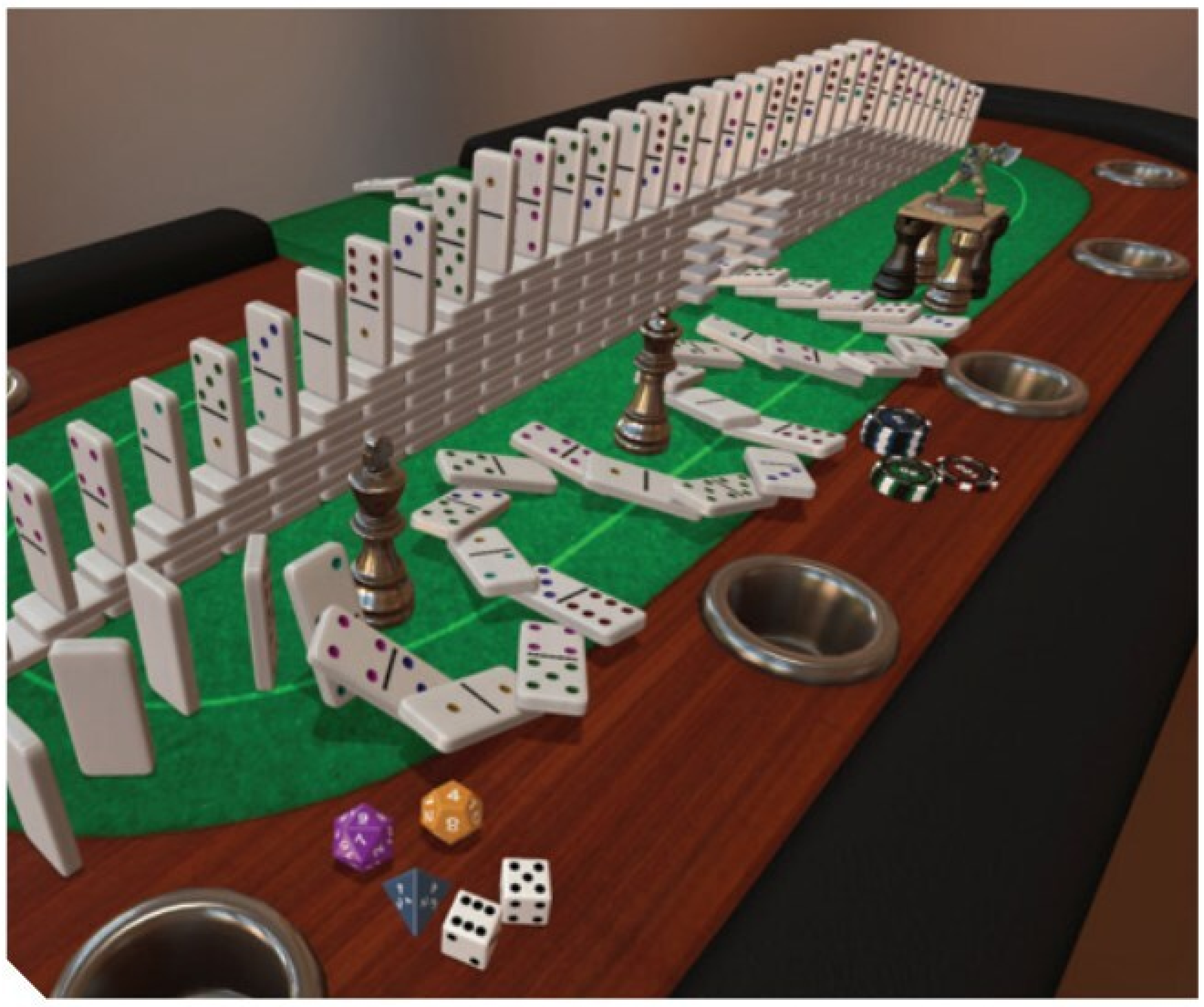
Subnautica was not initially developed as a VR title, and though it shows sometimes (like in the opening moments when what is meant to be a violent ship crash looks like a few flailing seatbelts), it still benefits from the transition. The game is about exploring an alien ocean world while attempting to survive. Coming across gigantic, whale-like creatures while watching your available oxygen slowly dissipate is horrifying in all the right ways. Frantically swimming to the surface is made all the more intense in VR, and the game is structured so if you want to take a break and play without the VR headset, that is a perfectly viable option.



SUPERHOT VR

***Platform:** PSVR, Rift, Vive*

On boring old two-dimensional platforms, Superhot is a unique experience that looks like a shooter, but plays like a puzzle game. The only way time moves is if you move yourself, which gives you a chance to plan out every bullet dodge, gunshot, and move like Neo from The Matrix. For the VR edition, developer Superhot Team created a dedicated set of levels you must physically move through in order to move time. You will find yourself dropping to the floor to dodge shotgun blasts, grabbing guns out of the air, and punching bad guys as they run toward you with all manner of weapon. It's a challenging, slow-motion workout, but it's a virtual reality highlight.



TABLETOP SIMULATOR

***Platform:** Vive*

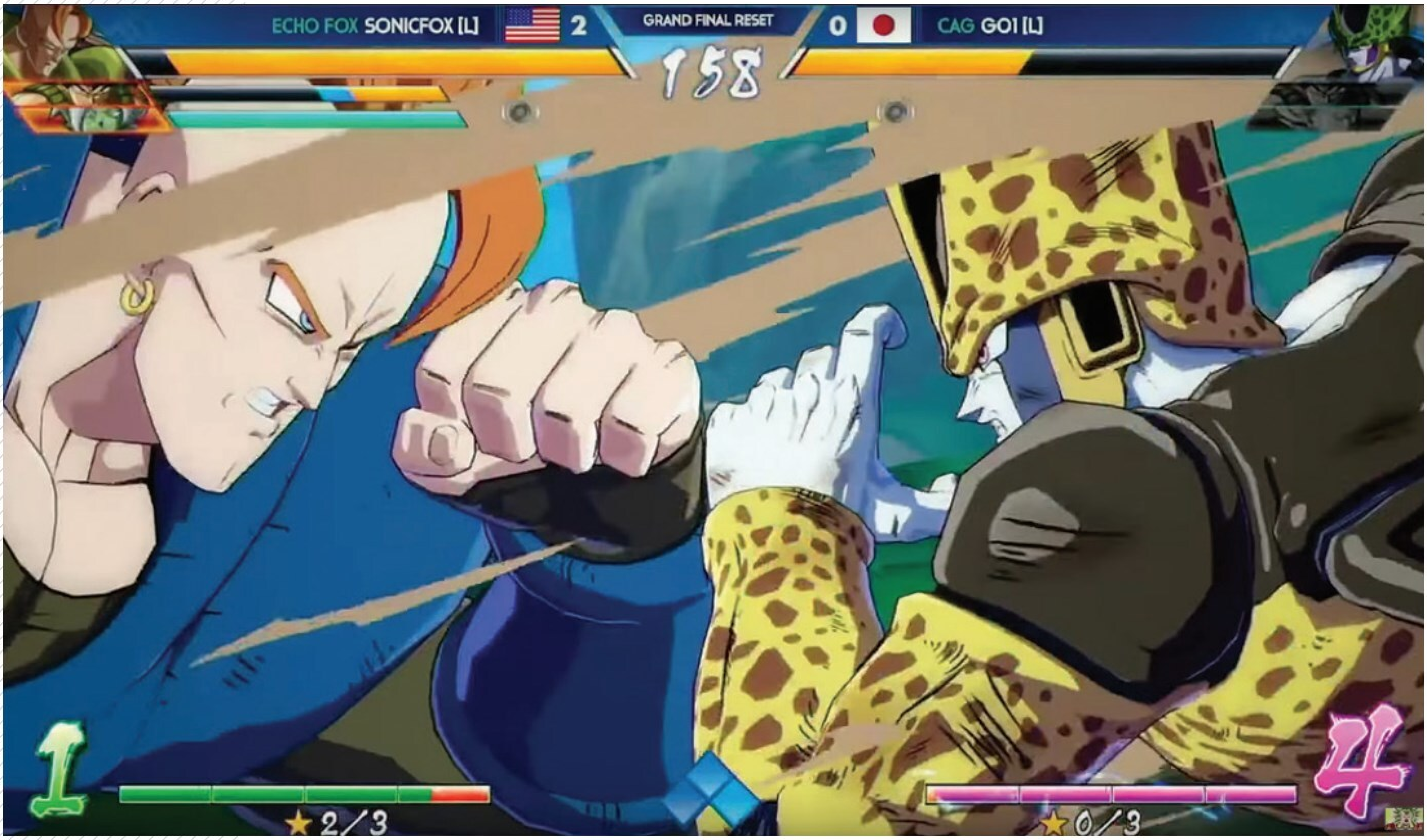
Including Tabletop Simulator is almost cheating because it simulates pretty much any game that can be played on a table, from checkers to complicated board games with intricate rules and pieces. Functionally, the game is just a setting with realistic physics where players can gather online and play tabletop games. The addition of VR increases the interactivity of the experience. You can lean in to look at the game you're playing and pick up the assorted pieces with your hand and move them around. If you start losing, you can even throw a tantrum and dramatically swipe your hand across the table to make sure everyone stops having fun as well. ◆

THE FIGHTING GAME RIVALRY OF THE YEAR

Behind the battle of gods at Evo

interview by Suriel Vazquez

Dragon Ball FighterZ has ignited the fighting game scene since its launch in January, bringing competitive players from games like Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, and Super Smash Bros. together. The two players who've emerged at the top are Dominique "SonicFox" McLean and Goichi "GO1" Kishida, who've fostered an international rivalry and friendship through the game. We caught up with both of them shortly after their outstanding championship match this year's Evo tournament, which McLean won after being defeated in an exhibition match the day before.



Going into the tournament, how confident were about winning Evo?
McLean: I felt my path was perfect, and I didn't drop a single game until Grand Finals.

Who did you think would be the biggest obstacle for you?
M: Obviously it was always going to be GO1, and I'm happy it ended with him.

The day before this tournament, he had beaten you in a first-to-ten exhibition. Did that shake your confidence?
M: I didn't feel any different after that exhibition. I knew I was tired and I was playing terrible. My movement was off and I was dropping everything. I was like, "Oh, I'm exhausted." I didn't really pay it much mind.

What do you think is the biggest difference between shorter matches in a tournament versus longer matches at an exhibition? Do you play different in each kind of match?
M: Longer sets are about learning about the opponent, whereas in short sets you're trying to apply your own gameplan as much as possible against the opponent.

You and GO1 have a bit of a history in FighterZ. Do you feel you know him better as a person through playing against him? Do you feel like you've become friends?
M: I already know I'm friends with GO1, but I also understand his play style, and I also know he lets his emotions affect his gameplay, and if I can notice when he's upset or when I do something that visibly makes him upset it can affect his play. I can definitely take advantage of that.

Have you two hung out beyond the tournaments you've played in at all?
M: Yes. Yesterday we went out and got drinks.

Is there a translation issue at all?
M: There usually is, but we try our best.

Have you been learning Japanese?
M: I'm trying to, yes.

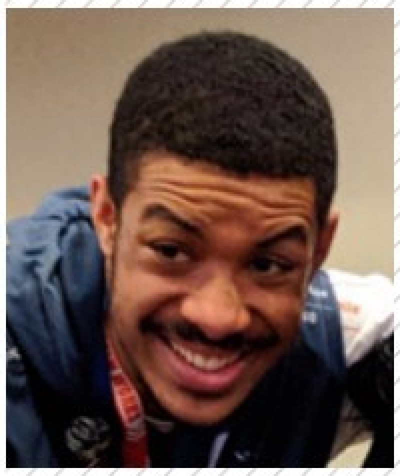
After GO1 reset the bracket by winning the first set, you switched to the player-one side. How do you feel that affected your play?
M: I'm more comfortable on the player one side, and it kind of harmed me, I don't know why, so when I first played him, I knew I just had to play from the left side.

Going forward, do you have any goals you want to accomplish? Do you plan to switch your team around at all now that Evo is over?
M: I'm looking forward to Cooler and hopefully Android 17 even though they haven't announced him. But I just want to stay number one. I'll keep learning the characters, keep adjusting.

Looking at FighterZ overall, where do you feel like it's lacking?
M: Tags can definitely be adjusted a little bit, guard-canceling could be a little bit better. Otherwise the low-tier [characters] can be brought up to more of the top-tiers, and the top-tiers should be slightly tweaked. Not too much because I'm really happy with how those characters are.

Is there any character you'd like to see buffed?
M: Beeurs.

Would you play him?
M: Yes.



Name:
Dominique McLean

Twitter:
@SonicFox5000

Occupation:
Player For Echo Fox

Location:
Townsend, DE

Going into the tournament, how did you feel about your chances of winning Evo?
Kishida: Going into the tournament I was of course confident that I could win.

Who did you think was your biggest obstacle at the event?
K: Of course SonicFox. The other players I was more aware of were Kazunoko [Ryota Inoue] and Dogura [Ryo Nozaki], from my own team.

You and SonicFox have a history in Dragon Ball FighterZ, having played each other multiple times this year. What is your impression of him as a person and player?
K: From a player's perspective, I think he's a game prodigy. Anything he tries to pick up, he learns really quickly and adapts. It's not just that he's a prodigy; he obviously trains, too. As a friend, I'm way older than he is, so I kind of can't keep up with how active and wild he is. But it always looks like SonicFox enjoys his life, and I'm happy for him.

Have you two hung out at tournaments at all?
K: We sometimes go out to eat, yeah.

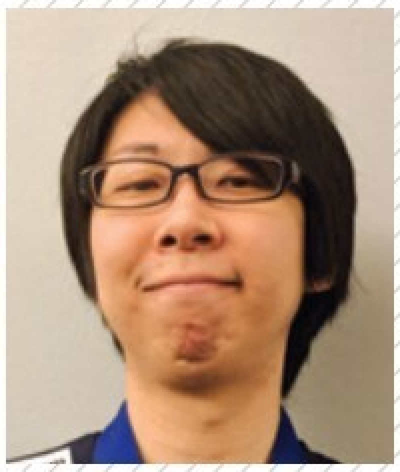
After you reset the bracket by beating from the losers' side, SonicFox switched to the player-one side. Did that affect your play at all?
K: Since I won 3-0 in the first set, and the tide was on my side, my honest thought was that I just wanted to play it out.

Do you think there's a difference between the two sides? Do you find it easier to play on one side versus another?
K: To me there's no real difference, so in the game it doesn't really matter to me. But when I reset the bracket 3-0, I think SonicFox was kind of nervous. So maybe he tried to take that time to get more comfortable.

Even though SonicFox beat you at Evo, you defeated him in an exhibition the day before. How do you feel like you two stack up against each other overall?
K: I feel like in casual matches, I don't actually keep track, but I feel like I'm winning a little bit more often, but I'm not sure. But generally, I think we're both equal in skill.

Do you feel there's a difference between the shorter sets at tournaments and the longer sets at exhibitions? Do you play differently in each?
K: In longer sets, I have more room to lose, so I try out more high-risk stuff. When I find out some of it doesn't work, I can adapt. But in shorter sets, a high-risk thing, if you miss it, that basically makes you lose. So I like longer sets so I can try out more things. And just because I'm winning more in the longer sets doesn't mean I'm better than SonicFox. I feel kind of lucky that I'm winning the longer sets right now.

What your plans for FighterZ going forward? Are you planning to change your team?
K: Before Evo I was going to Capcom Pro Tour events (for Street Fighter V), so I didn't have too much time to practice Dragon Ball. I had to stick with a team I was used to. But from now on I'll probably skip the CPT events and train at home [In DBFZ]. It depends on the balance patch, too. When it comes out, I'll practice more and find the three best characters I think are the best in the game. ◆



Name:
Goichi Kishida

Twitter:
@GO13151

Occupation:
Player For Cyclops Athlete Gaming

Location:
Osaka, Japan

GAMES ABOUT REAL MUSICIANS

by Ben Reeves

The Beatles: Rock Band

In 2009, one of the greatest music games of all time collided with one of the greatest bands of all time. The Beatles: Rock Band was the first band-centric game in the series, and its presentation lived up to the band's legendary status. Players reenacted many of the legendary English rock band's famous live performances using Harmonix's polished note-highway gameplay. It was the perfect example of why the Beatles' iconic discography has withstood the test of time.

50 Cent: Blood on the Sand

During a tour through the Middle East, 50 Cent's prized diamond-and-pearl encrusted human skull is stolen by terrorists, so the rapper sets off to crack a few skulls of his own. We don't know where Swordfish Studios came up with the story for this third-person shooter, but we imagine it's based on 50 Cent's tour diaries.

Victor Vran: Motörhead – Through the Ages

This DLC expansion to the gothic-fantasy RPG, Victor Vran, let players slay undead monsters using heavy-metal guitar riffs from one of the loudest bands on the planet. But this tour through three demon-infested worlds probably felt like a vacation for Motörhead's tough-as-nails frontman Lemmy Kilmister.

Crüe Ball

The name Mötley Crüe practically screams "pinball," so in 1992 Electronic Arts developed this digital game themed around the glam-metal band. Players bounced a pinball up a three-level playing field while rocking out to surprisingly catchy 16-bit arrangements of Mötley Crüe's music.

Michael Jackson's Moonwalker

When an evil figure known as Mr. Big kidnaps children from across the city, the kids pray that someone will use the power of synthesized pop music to set them free. Unfortunately, they had to make due with Michael Jackson and his backward heel shuffle.

Revolution X

In this dystopian version of 1996, an oppressive regime bans all forms of music, television, and video games, and then kidnaps the rock band Aerosmith to boot. During this on-rails arcade shooter, players shot enemies with compact discs, which turned out to be the best thing anyone has done with Aerosmith's music since.

Kiss: Psycho Circus: The Nightmare Child

The Nightmare Child is a first-person shooter based on a comic-book series from Todd McFarlane, which in turn was based on the band of clown-makeup enthusiasts known as Kiss. This 2000 shooter was decent, but it was completely overshadowed by the release of id's Quake III.

Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style

In 1999, Paradox Development reworked its controversial fighting game Thrill Kill into a four-player slugfest starring hip-hop legends the Wu-Tang Clan. The result was a convoluted mess of fighting systems, but like they say, "Wu-Tang Clan ain't nuthing ta feud wit."

Journey (1983)

In the early '80s, "wild alien groupoids" stole the musical instruments belonging to the synth-happy rock band Journey and then scattered their equipment across the galaxy, behind bizarre, arcade-like obstacles. Sadly, the game was so bad that it made many gamers stop believing.

YOU NOW HAVE A MILK BOTTLE

Frankie Goes to Hollywood

British pop band Frankie Goes to Hollywood is known for their hit debut single "Relax." They're less known for this obscure adventure game that had players searching for aspects of humanity to "become a full person." The game was bad, but we were eager to find something that kicked Spice World off this list. ◆

TOYOTA

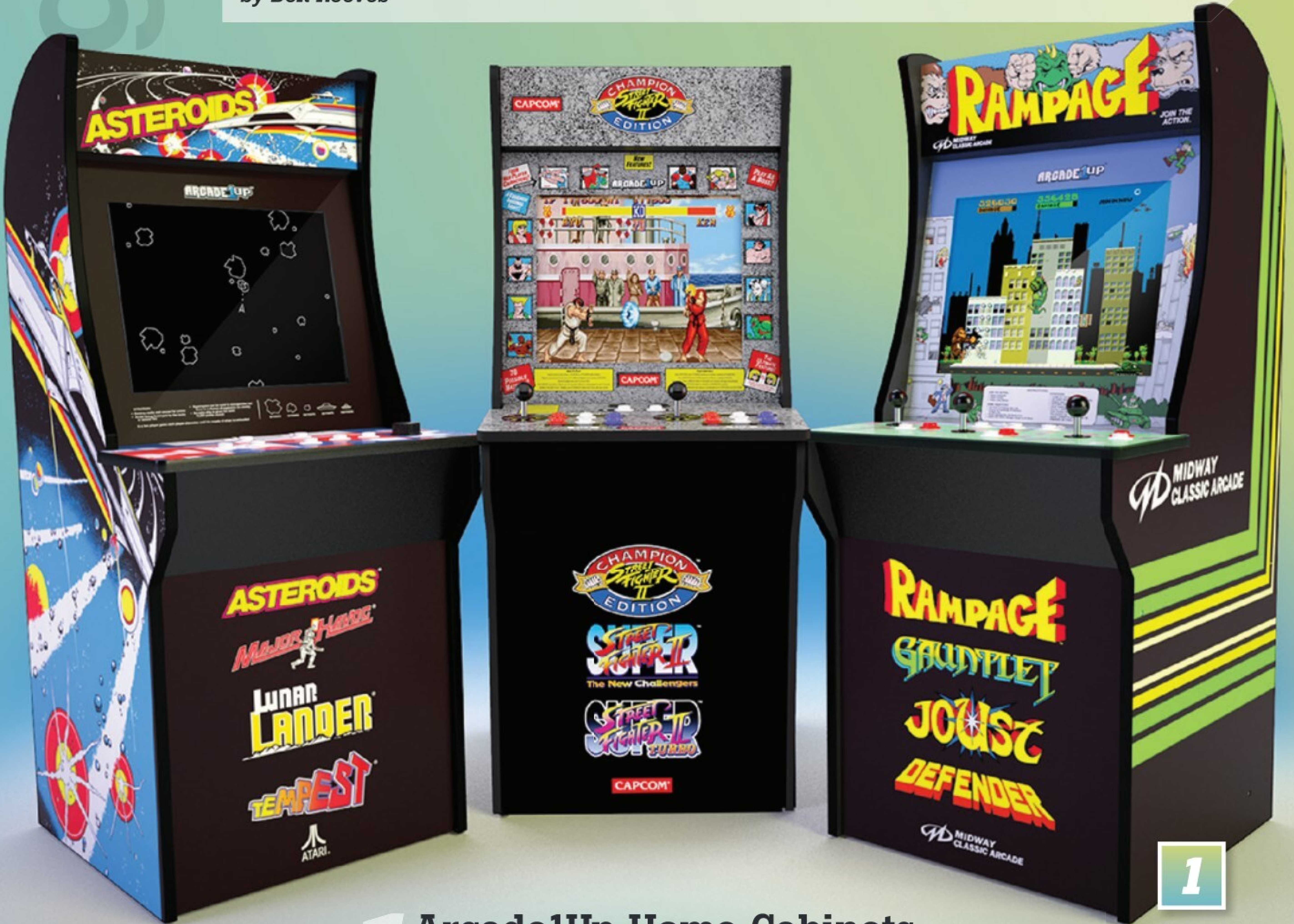
Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Hands on the wheel. Foot on the pedal. Skin tingling. Hair flying. Heart thumping. Nerves jumping. Eyes wide. Pulse quick. It's a whole-body experience in C-HR and 86. ***Let's Go Places.***

Prototypes shown with options. ©2018 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

Build Your Own Home Arcade

by Ben Reeves


ASTEROIDS
ARCADE1UP
ASTEROIDS
MAJOR HAVOC
LUNAR LANDER
TEMPEST
ATARI
CAPCOM
CHAMPION STREET FIGHTER II EDITION
SUPER STREET FIGHTER II The New Challengers
SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO
CAPCOM
RAMPAGE
JOIN THE ACTION.
MIDWAY CLASSIC ARCADE
RAMPAGE
GAUNTLET
JOUST
DEFENDER
MIDWAY CLASSIC ARCADE
1

1 Arcade1Up Home Cabinets

Real arcade cabinets are heavy, bulky, and often require a great deal of repair. Arcade1Up game cabinets look, feel and play just like their classic arcade counterparts, but they're 25-percent smaller than a traditional cabinet and constructed out of a lightweight wood blend. A 17-inch color LCD screen ensures that these arcade legend look as good as ever. Each cabinet features official-licensed artwork and contains approximately four arcade classics, such as Missile Command, Asteroids, Rampage Gauntlet, and Street Fighter II.

$299 | *arcade1up.com*

2 Tiny Arcade

Maybe you've always dreamed of having a home arcade, but your apartment is already bursting at the seams. Tiny Circuits' mouse-sized cabinets won't even fill up an entire room in a dollhouse. These adorable cabinets might be only 3.5-inches tall, but they're fully functional, and you can choose from classics like Space Invaders, Galaxian, Pac-Man, or Ms. Pac-Man.

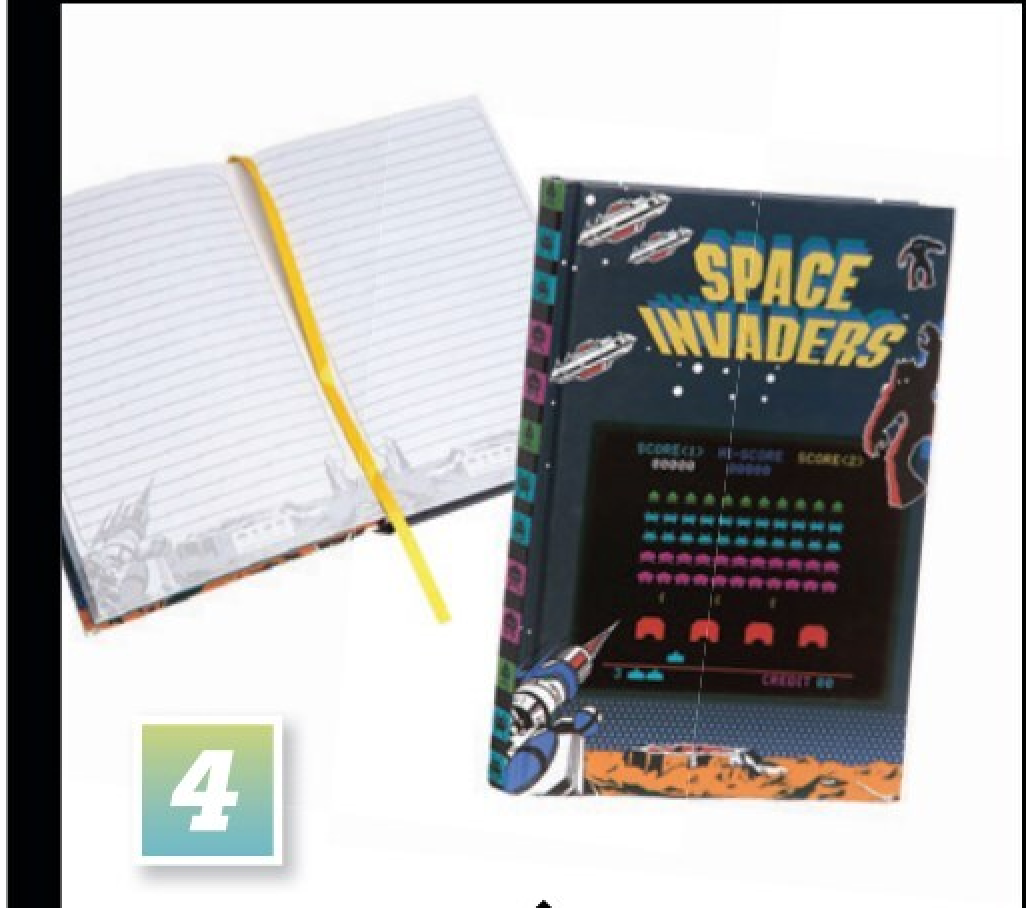
$59.95 | tinycircuits.com

3 Light-Up Vintage Metal Arrow Arcade Marquee

You don't want your houseguests to get lost after a trip to the restroom. This faux vintage arcade sign from Zug Monster Signs is handmade from real tin and measures more than 25-inches tall by 9-inches wide. This is the perfect way to light up your basement game room.

$59.95 | zugmonstersigns.com

3
ARCADE
25¢
games


4
SPACE INVADERS

4 Space Invaders Journal

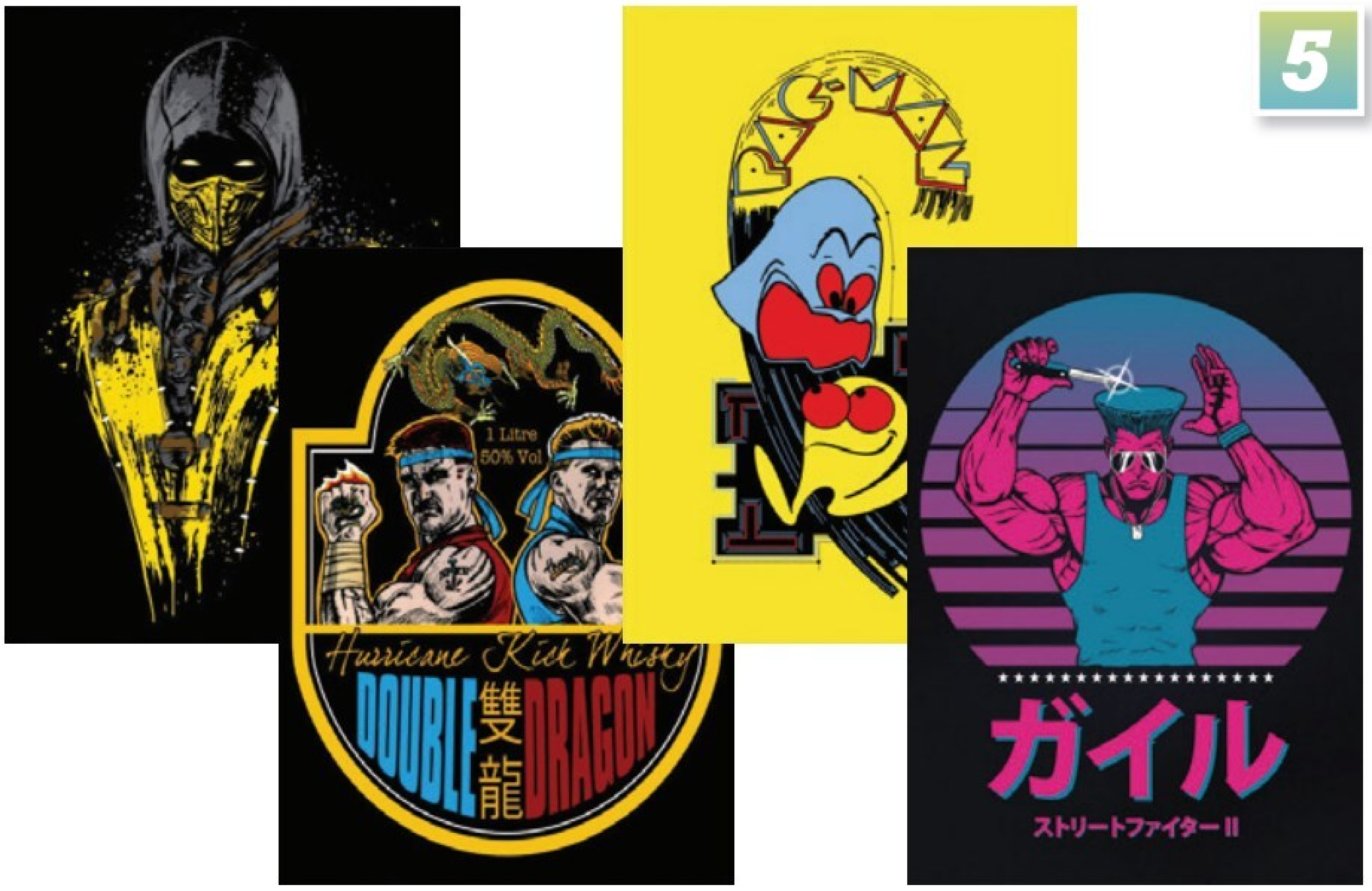
Sketch out your dream arcade setup or record your high scores with this 232-page journal. Each page features Space Invaders' iconic cabinet marquee art, and the included schematics will show you how to build your own upright or cocktail cabinet.

$11.99 | thinkgeek.com*

5 Displate Metal Wall Prints

Even a cool arcade needs some hot wall art. Not only do Displates metal wall signs look slick, they can take a licking and only look better with age. Displates' wide range of designs cover everything from Star Wars to Pac-Man to Street Fighter.

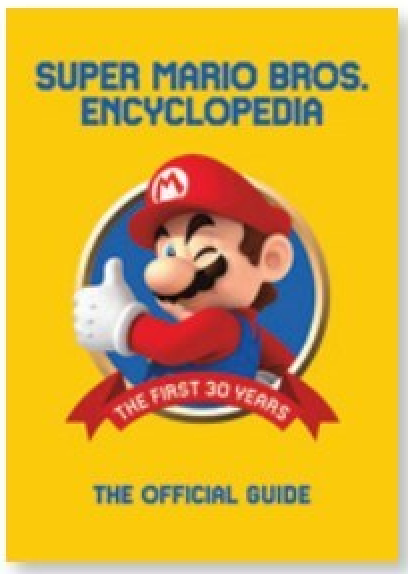
Starting at $44.00 | displate.com


5
PAC-MAN
1 Litre
50% Vol
Hurricane Kick Whisky
DOUBLE 雙龍 DRAGON
ガイル
ストリートファイターII

Media Shelf

ARTCADE
THE BOOK OF CLASSIC ARCADE GAME ARTWORK

INCLUDES THEATRICAL CUT
DEADPOOL 2
SUPER DUPER CUT


SUPER MARIO BROS. ENCYCLOPEDIA
THE FIRST 30 YEARS
THE OFFICIAL GUIDE

ARTCADE: THE BOOK OF CLASSIC ARCADE GAME ARTWORK

Classic arcade graphics were abstract, but the art on the side of the cabinets was usually eye-popping and otherworldly. This archive of classic arcade marquees features more than 40-years' worth of coin-op art, recreated using beautiful lithographic printing.

$32.99
bitmapbooks.co.uk

DEADPOOL 2 PLUS SUPER DUPER CUT

Fox's *Deadpool* was an irreverent send-up of the modern superhero blockbuster. The sequel delivered even more explosive firefights and fourth-wall breaking hijinks, and this extended cut features over 15 minutes of brand-new footage and extended extras.

$19.99
foxmovies.com

SUPER MARIO ENCYCLOPEDIA

Mario's stories might be simple, but after more than 30 years of adventures, Nintendo has constructed a surprisingly bizarre universe. This encyclopedia tracks the evolution of Goombas, shows the early designs for Yoshi, and features a detailed interview with longtime producer Takashi Tezuka.

$39.99
darkhorse.com

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*Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of both Game Informer and ThinkGeek

❶

October2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 02
- Forza Horizon 4 (Xbox One, PC)
- Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise (PS4)
- Mega Man 11 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 05
- Assassin's Creed Odyssey (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶
- Super Mario Party (Switch)

Tuesday 09
- Disgaea 1 Complete (PS4, Switch)
- The Occupation (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- WWE 2K19 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 11
- Child of Light (Switch)

Friday 12
- Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

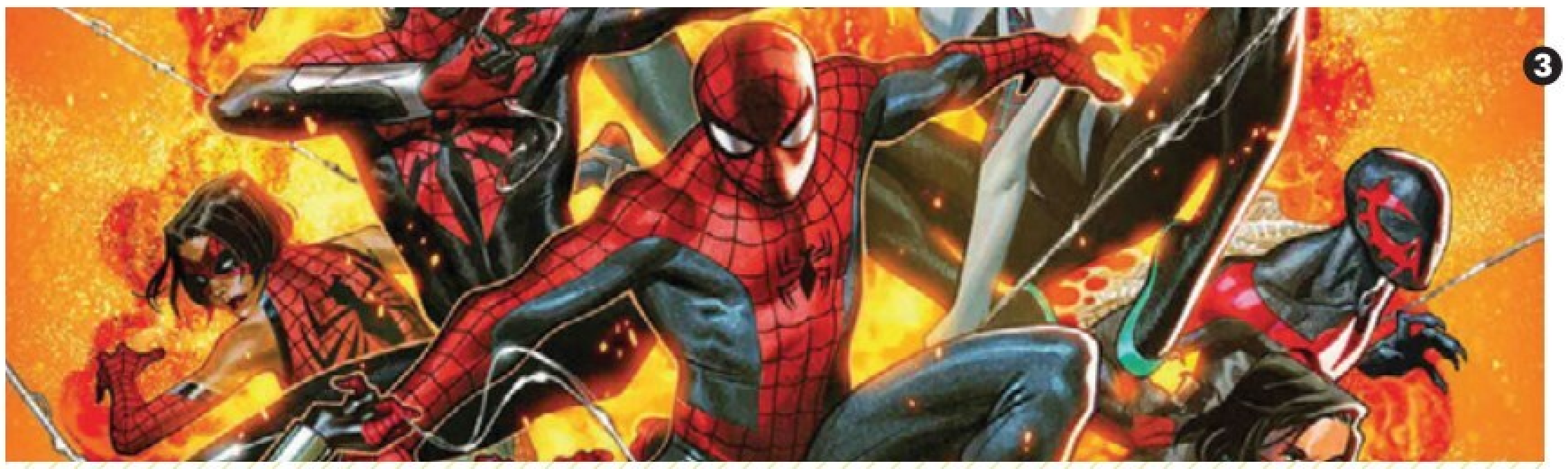
Tuesday 16
- For Honor: Marching Fire (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Lego DC Super Villains (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Starlink: Battle for Atlas (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Warriors Orochi 4 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 19
- Battlefield V (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Dark Souls Trilogy (PS4, Xbox One)
- Soulcalibur VI (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 23
- Crayola Scoot (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Just Dance 2019 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, 360, Wii U, Wii)

Friday 26
- My Hero One's Justice (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- N.E.R.O. (Switch)
- Red Dead Redemption II (PS4, Xbox One)

Tuesday 30
- Call of Cthulhu (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Yomawari: The Long Night Collection (Switch)



❸

GAMER CULTURE

Monday 01
Spider-geddon ❸

The 2014 event that brought every Spider-Man character together concludes this month in a new five-part series called Spider-geddon. Christos Gage and Dan Slott aim to destroy as many of these web swingers as possible. This comic also brings Insomniac Games' version of Spider-Man into Marvel's comic continuity.

Wednesday 10
Cursed Comics Cavalcade

DC Comics is releasing a new series it claims will deliver the "most terrifying, most shocking, and most horrific" stories in the company's history. Cursed Comics Cavalcade's first issue is drenched in hyperbole, but delivers horror-based stories for Batman, Wonder Woman, Guy Gardner, Swamp Thing, and Zatanna for $9.99.

Friday 26
TwitchCon

Hundreds of Twitch's streaming partners and ambassadors will be on hand for this three-day show in San Jose. Activities include meet and greets with the talent, an artist alley, panels, and plenty of gaming options for both digital and table top.

Saturday 27
GeekGirlCon

GeekGirlCon 18 is a two-day celebration for the women contributing to games, art, comics, technology, and more. Located in the heart of Seattle, this convention offers gaming tournaments and free play, panels, workshops, cosplay, and a DIY science zone.

❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 05
- The Man in the High Castle (Amazon)
- Venom (theaters)

Saturday 06
- Flight of the Conchords: Live at the London Apollo (HBO)

Sunday 07
- The Walking Dead (AMC)

Tuesday 09
- Black Lightning (CW)
- The Flash (CW)

Thursday 11
- Supernatural (CW)

Friday 12
- First Man (theaters)
- Goosebumps 2: Haunted Halloween (theaters)

Sunday 14
- Supergirl (CW)

Monday 15
- Arrow (CW)

Friday 19
- Halloween (theaters)

Monday 22
- DC's Legends of Tomorrow(CW)

Friday 26
- Castlevania (Netflix) ❷

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Online Multiplayer Shooter

» PUBLISHER
Activision

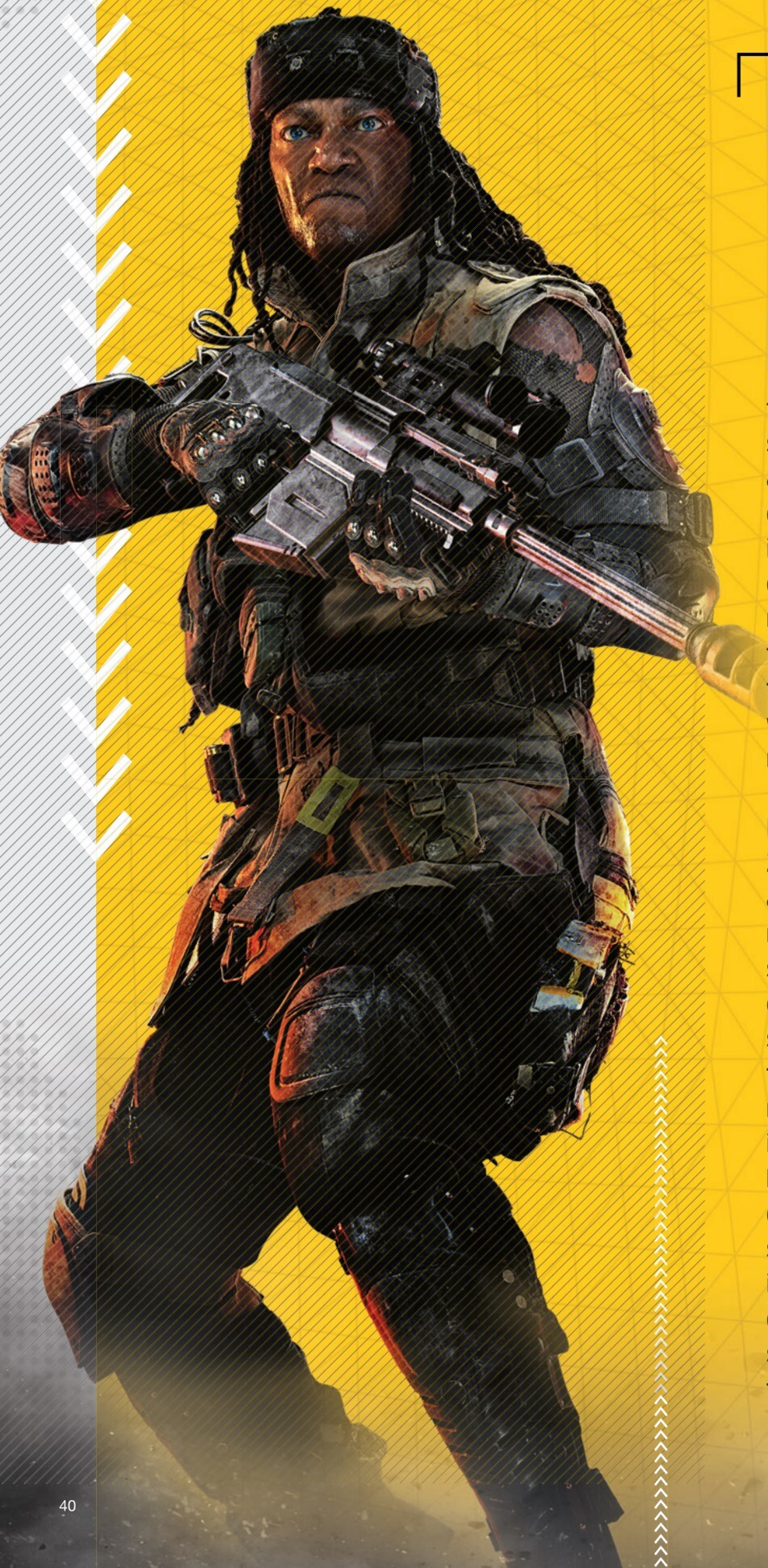
» DEVELOPER
Treyarch

» RELEASE
October 12

PAINT IT BLACK

We go hands-on with Call of Duty: Black Ops 4's new battle royale mode to see how it stacks up against the world-class competition

by
DANIEL TACK



In every Call of Duty discussion, there's always the uninformed take that argues the franchise is the same every year. This sentiment couldn't be more wrong; over the last few installments we've traveled to space, explored futuristic weapons and mobility enhancements, and gone back to boots on the ground in World War II. This year, Treyarch goes a step further and takes a monumental risk by stripping one of the core Call of Duty experiences: the single-player campaign. Instead, we're getting a new battle royale mode, Blackout.

Treyarch is no stranger to risk. Pioneering the now-ubiquitous Zombies mode, delving into bizarre and cerebral storytelling, and now removing a core component of the series for what some would call trend chasing, Treyarch risks alienating staunch franchise advocates. But the large, socially infused suite of multiplayer options could prove incredibly sweet as well – especially by taking the popular battle royale genre and infusing Call of Duty's signature polish, refinement, and iteration. After a few hours with the game, I'm confident that this daring shift will yield immense rewards for the franchise.

BASE JUMPING INTO THE FRAY

Blackout Mode undoubtedly draws plenty of inspiration from other battle royale games. But Treyarch injects enough of its own DNA to make even the most die-hard Fortnite acolytes or PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds advocates take notice. A blend of great shooting, awesome vehicles, cool weapons and items, and even clever implementation of A.I. zombies makes for an intense, enjoyable battle that plays out differently every time.

As I sit down to be the first person to play Blackout outside of Activision employees, the session chatter is reminiscent of my own home battle royale games on Discord with my crew – playful smack talk, old rivalries, drop location discussion. We're playing with 80 people today, which Treyarch says is the number for the Blackout beta, though internally the studio has tested well over 100.

Blackout features solo, duos, and four-person squads, known as "quads." In team play, friendly fire is on, so you need to be careful. I'm teamed up with studio design director David "Lord" Vonderhaar, who's as animated as ever and eager to get into the game. Vonderhaar is a quintessential hardcore gamer, the kind of person you would expect to lead an old-school World of Warcraft raid or a brutal game of Dungeons & Dragons. He dials down deep into the systems and mechanics, and he immediately outlines how things work in this squad: Call out the number of enemies, distance, and a nearby identifiable object when you spot a target.

Before we can start playing, we select characters. There's a large roster to pick from, and Vonderhaar says many more will be added after launch. You unlock more as you play, forming the backbone of the progression system in Blackout. You can pick memorable faces from throughout the history of the Black Ops series, including campaign heroes, zombie mode stars, and Blackout-specific characters new to the franchise. These combatants are strictly cosmetic; everyone drops into Blackout with nothing, but they're a fun way to show off some of your accomplishments or bring some style into a match. I pick Scarlett, one of the new zombie mode additions, and get ready to rock.

A flying formation of drop choppers take a set path across the map so your team can plan a starting location on the map, which looks comparable in size to those in Fortnite and PUBG. We decide to visit an iconic Black Ops region, Nuketown Island, and by the time we dive out almost no one else is left on the chopper. It's a safe drop by any standard. While speeding toward the ground, I learn about the wingsuit every player brings to the fray. You drop extremely

Battle around the giant dish at the Array destination fast out of the sky and can position yourself toward drop locations quickly, covering great distances in a short amount of time. Your automated parachute kicks in right before you hit the ground, likely only for a few seconds depending on the drop. This is important outside of the drop phase as well, as you can base jump anytime when your vertical situation calls for it, whether you want to leave a tall structure or need to bail from a MH-6 Little Bird light helicopter you found on the map. Base jumping also has combat applications both for initiating and getting out of battle; mastering it is a definite boon. Be careful – there's fall damage, and mistiming base jumps or helicopter exits can cause an embarrassing death.

We land on Nuketown Island, where the nuke has ostensibly gone off. The landscape is devastated. A giant signboard on the island shows the number of players at the destination, so if you're playing with a party of four and the sign says seven, you know you have three other players around that you're probably going to have to deal with right away. If you can see the sign, chances are someone else can too, so be wary. Nuketown Island is a loot-rich location, so I quickly scurry underground to hunt for gear. I grab a few different guns, tier 3 armor, a plethora of various health packs, and some scopes.

We land near another team and the fight is on almost immediately as I come up out of the bunker. This is a common occurrence in Blackout. Destinations (named areas on the map) are often contested right away, but survivors enjoy much better loot most of the time. Land outside of them and you may have to make do with lesser options, but you also have a much better chance of avoiding immediate combat. Unfortunately, this game ends quickly as my team is divided around the island and gets picked off as we fail to gather up. Teamwork matters!

A few minutes later, we're dropping again. Seeking a less action-packed run, we select an offshoot location, some warehouses and homes. However, we didn't get the solace we were looking for; another team lands right with us.

I push the button on a garage door and realize someone on another team landed directly behind me – they're punching me in the back. My health drains rapidly, and no guns are in sight – just a pile of ammo and the throwing hatchet ability from multiplayer right in front of me. The enemy gets me down to about 40 health before I whip the one-shot kill weapon at point blank range into the generous target presented to me. They go down, and the wail from across the room is satisfying. Anyone that plays battle royale knows the emergent stories that come out of these games can be awesome, from little momentous rounds of early fisticuff scuffles like this

// DO IT WITH CHARACTER

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

When you first start the mode, Blackout offers a few generic playable characters, but the unlockable roster of familiar and new faces is deep. With more than 20 characters to pick from (and many more on the way), cosmetic characters are your primary customization and progression element in Blackout.

Many classic names from previous Treyarch-made Call of Duty campaigns are playable, like Frank Woods, Viktor Reznov, Raul Menendez, and Alex Mason. Fan favorites from Zombies mode can also be unlocked, including Takeo Masaki, Tank Dempsey, Edward Richtofen, and Nikolai Belinski. The Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 specialists and new Zombies cast also make appearances.

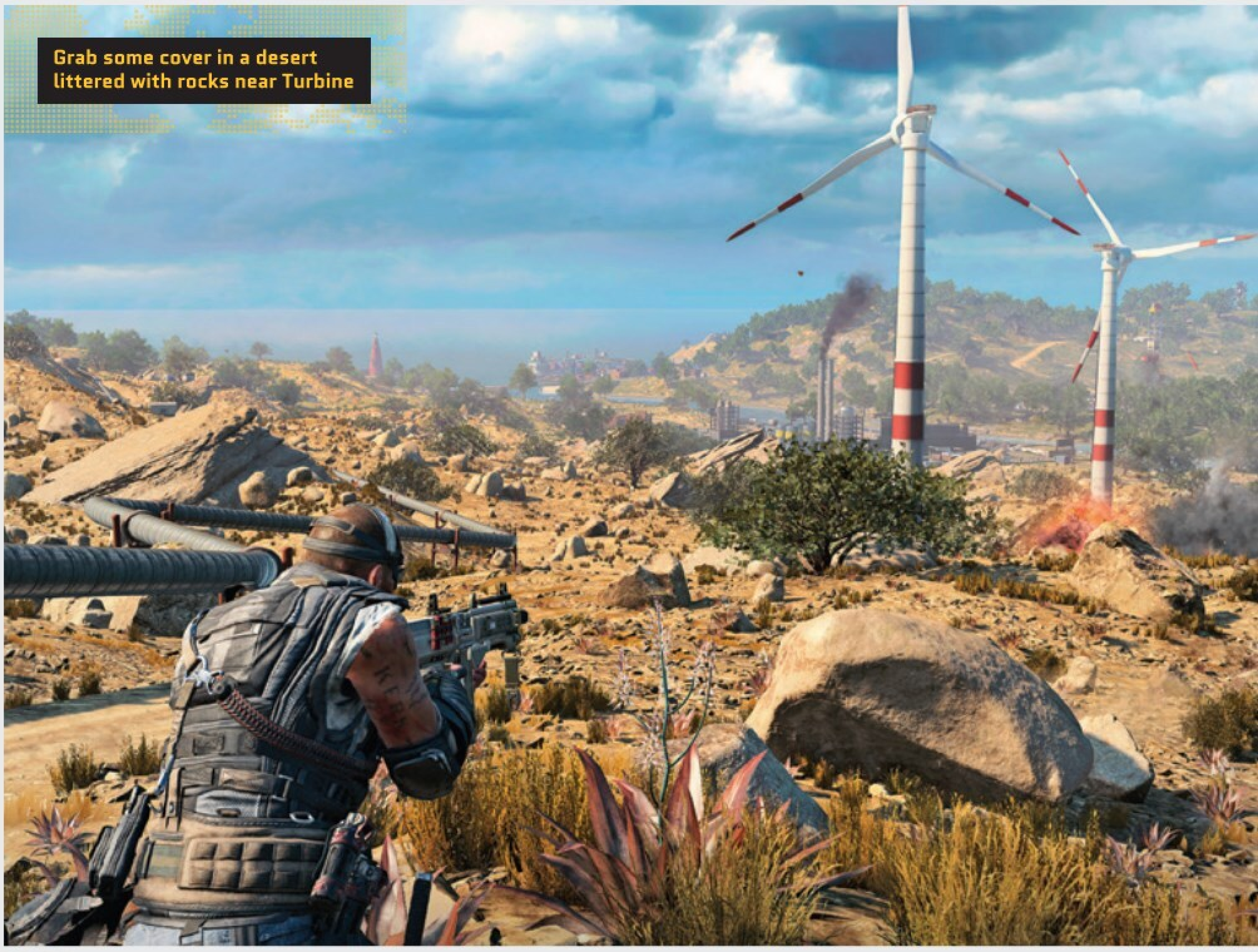
Each character is unlocked by completing a unique mission. For example, to gain access to the specialist character Battery, you have to find her War Machine grenade launcher in a game, get a few kills with it, and finish among the top 15 players. Missions vary in complexity and some of the more iconic combatants may require multiple missions to unlock.

Often, items related to these character unlock missions take up inventory space and can be dropped and lost on death, so you may be able to steal someone's special item and collect a character for yourself. Studio design director David Vonderhaar isn't concerned that the unlocks could be too difficult. He says it will be easy to tune things and change them in case players are having a lot of trouble collecting certain ones. He also says Treyarch will likely create event weekends where it will be far easier to obtain character items and complete their missions. Other cosmetic things like calling cards and icons can be unlocked in Blackout as well, but none of the characters (including the generic ones) are customizable.

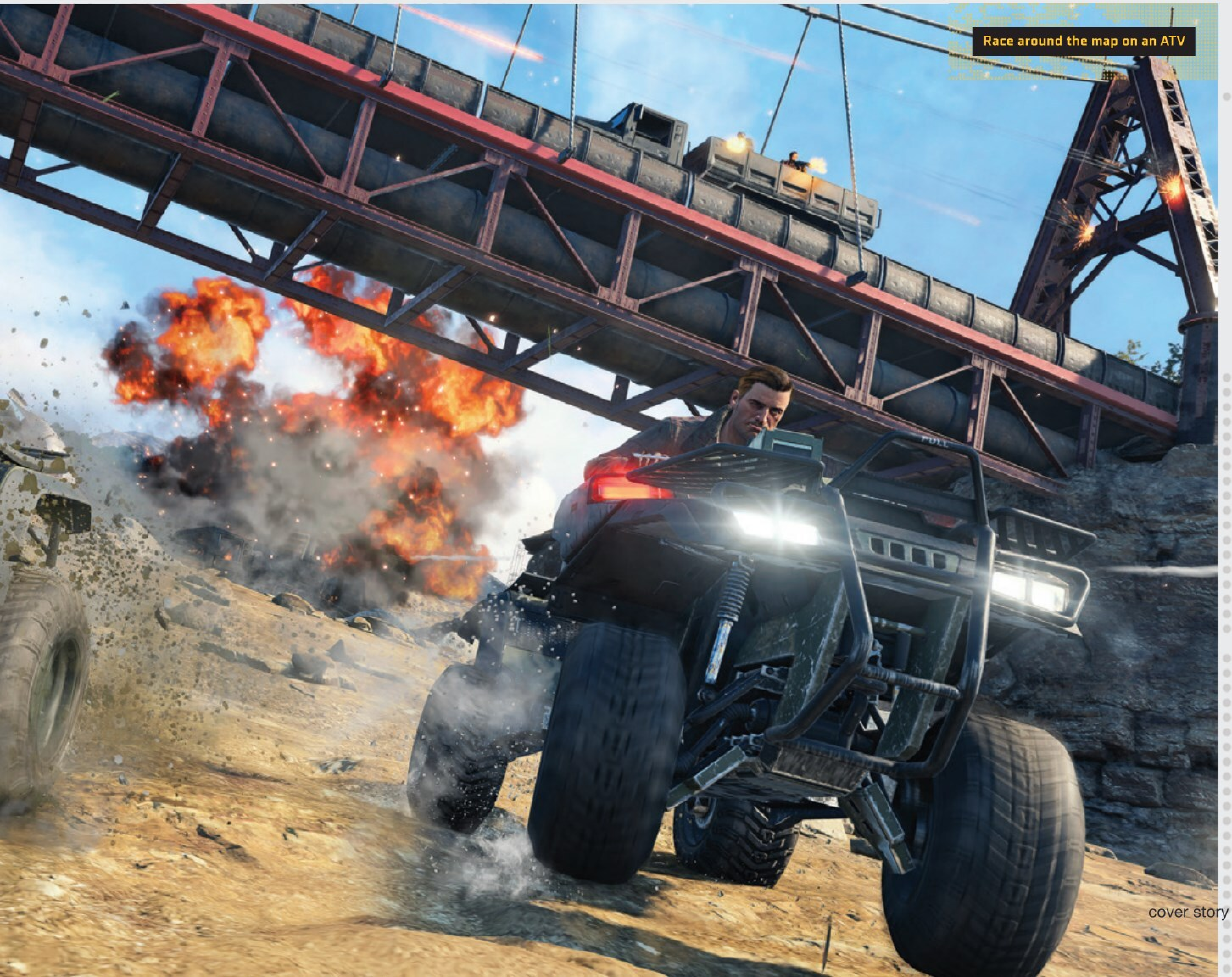
encounter to much bigger ones involving multiple vehicle pileups.

While I showboat and gloat about my hatchet kill around the room (emotes are not yet in the game, though they are being worked on) my team is already under heavy duress in the nearby buildings. Since we landed with another team, weapons are at a premium and about half of the players in the vicinity are wandering around with nothing as they frantically search buildings under the watchful gaze of their equipped teammates.

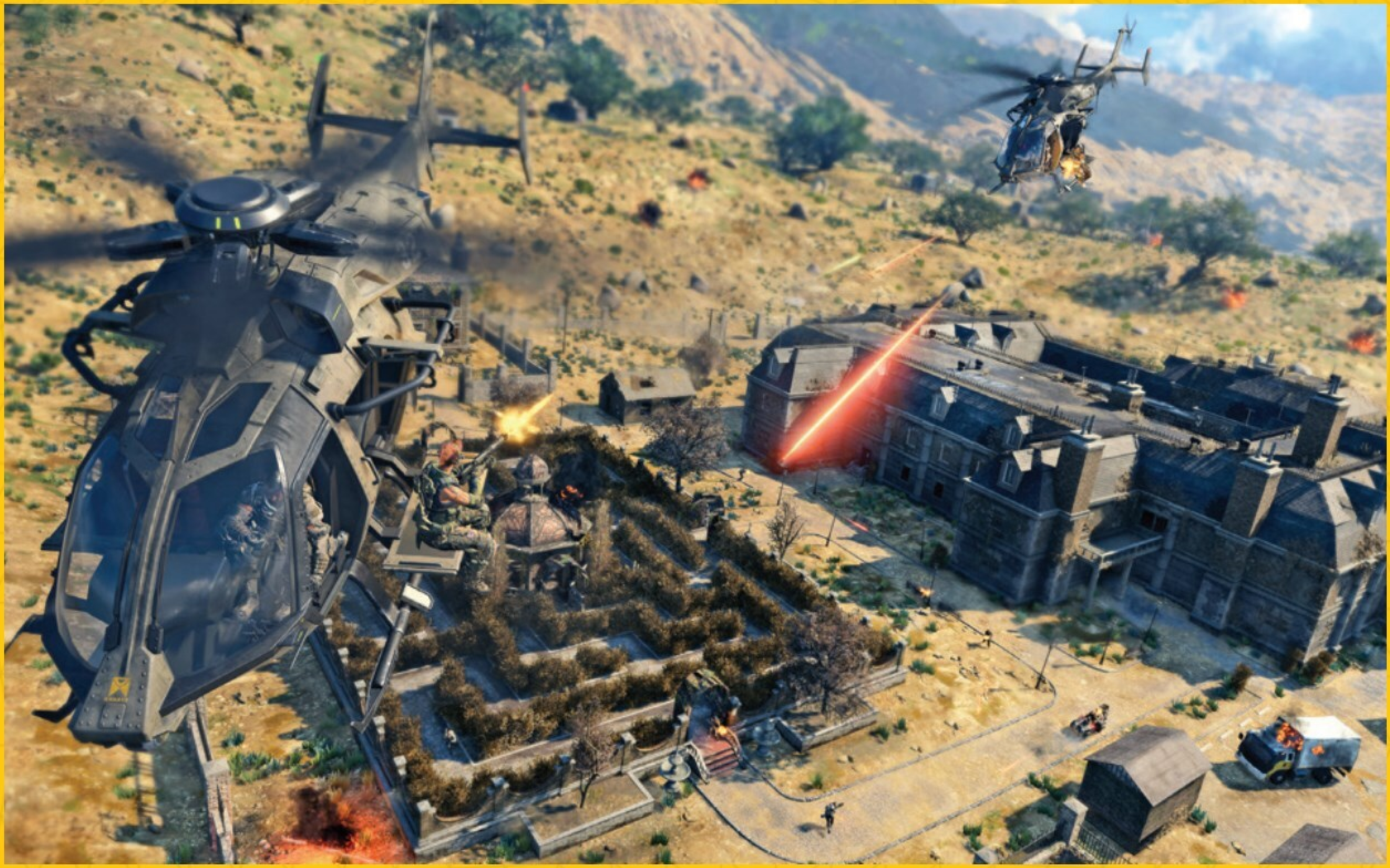
The next few minutes are a whirlwind as we attempt to locate the last remaining survivor from the other team who is trying to pick off our quad one by one, baiting them into a vulnerable chokepoint. The lone wolf picks off three of us before going down, crippling our team and effectively taking us out of the match. Thankfully, the lobby and the next queue are only moments away, and we're all eager to get back into it. You can spectate or leave and jump right into another round – the choice is yours. The speed at which you can get back into another match takes a lot of the sting of defeat out of the equation.



Grab some cover in a desert littered with rocks near Turbine



Race around the map on an ATV



// PvP BY LAND, AIR, AND SEA

Vehicles are a big deal in Blackout. The map is large, but the "1,500 Nuketowns" size Treyarch previously touted doesn't really put things into perspective. From two of the most distant points in the map, it would take around five minutes to sprint from one to the other, which means while you won't be forced to find a vehicle to keep up with the game, it sure is a luxury.

In the Blackout beta some vehicles are available for high mobility and advantageous combat opportunities, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, with more expected to come later. Vehicles are much more than travel devices, and can be used in a variety of ways, including just running opponents over. If you're rolling solo, you can even seat swap in a chopper or car and attempt to pilot and gun at the same time in a frenzied fit. Here's a look at vehicles currently available in Blackout.

ATV

[1 pilot, 1 passenger]

ATVs can get you across the map fast, create distractions with an annoying horn, and function as a speedy skirmish vehicle for quick and dirty encounters. Blaze by with your passenger shooting and destroy the enemy before they know what hit them. You can also find an ATV early in a match and go off exploring for more, ending up with a convoy of four ATVs ripping across land.

Cargo Truck

[1 pilot, 4 passengers]

This truck is an incredible mobile arsenal. Unlike other vehicles, the cargo truck also functions as a storage unit, where you can stack up a ton of loot and be better prepared for any situation. While you may not want to commit one of your two primary weapon slots to a rocket launcher during tiny house breaches, it's great to have one handy on the back of a truck for when a chopper appears overhead. The truck also features non-traditional seating; players can crouch and lay prone in the back for additional cover.

Little Bird

[1 pilot, 4 passengers]

This helicopter is a blast to play with and gives players the chance to unleash hell from above on targets below. As you can imagine, letting loose with multiple players and guns from the air is a huge advantage – until it's not. While the Little Bird is awesome, it's also vulnerable, and if you're not careful your entire team can be taken out with a single well-placed rocket, a sniper that takes out the pilot, or even just bad piloting into a warehouse. That said, the Little Bird is easily my favorite vehicle as pilot or passenger. It controls well even when you hop in the first time.

Zodiac

[1 pilot, 1 passenger]

This boat is strictly for water travel, and it's a great way to navigate the huge, forking river that cuts a swath through the middle of the map.

TAKING TO THE AIR

Next match, I request we get to the chopper, as I'd love to pilot or just hang off the side of one and shoot. Vehicles are not lacking on the map, and you can quickly learn the places that Little Birds are most likely to spawn. The helipad at the Estates looks like a good place to start, so my team goes off the beaten path and takes a long drop toward luxury. There's a basketball court on the grounds, and you can shoot some hoops here, if you take into account that the ball takes up a weapon slot and leaves you vulnerable to any passersby. The game world has other "just for fun" interactive objects for players to hunt down.

One of the things I immediately notice in Blackout is that weapons are plentiful. You rarely need to scavenge through multiple houses or landmarks before finding something to shoot. The first moments of a match are often furious and frenzied, and fists may come into play, but the hunt for anything to defend yourself isn't often a real problem. Instead, the early stages of a match are about upgrading your loot and developing the weapons you like via attachments like suppressors, scopes, and grips.

You can carry two weapons at any given time, swapping out guns you don't like for new ones or as required by your ammo situation (there are eight different types of ammunition). Blackout uses a quick equip system, so anything you pick up is immediately attached and equipped. In practice, the instant equipping makes a lot of sense given the intense nature of the game. You are going to want that gun in hand, grenade available, and scope attached as soon as possible. If you don't like an attachment, you can quickly jump into the menu to move things around as you please.

You can also find coveted gold guns from special chests. These are significantly better than standard weapons and come with pre-attached augments and enhancements. Our location choice pays off when I find one of these – a spec'd out Titan light machine gun – amidst the Estate's expensive cars, fancy art, and swimming pool. These chests have set spawn locations, but they don't spawn every game.

The scavenging done, I finally get the chance to hop in the Little Bird. The controls are intuitive – even to a novice – but air travel comes with significant risks. These choppers are easy to shoot down, especially with rocket launchers, but being able to speed over the map is worth the tradeoff. Teammates can lean out the side of the bird ready to fire upon anything on the ground with a huge advantage.

Bring a powerful scope if you're planning on having a long-range sniper battle

Securing drops and stashes can make life a lot easier for your team

As in other battle royale games, the field of play is dictated by a circle that gets smaller and smaller, forcing the action. Blackout's closing circle also destroys items and can punish players who get too greedy trying to skirt the confines of play. If you attempt this in a Little Bird, it could cause helicopter malfunctions that bring your whole team crashing to the ground.

The circle also collapses into nothing in Blackout, meaning it will eventually engulf everything if players somehow manage to avoid each other in the tiny final area. In true Treyarch fashion, players essentially experience vivid auditory and visual hallucinations outside of the later circles (Don't imagine yourself in that Frozen Forest!). Luckily, our air adventure occurs without incident, and I drop my team off inside the circle ready for action.

A lot of frenetic looting occurs in the next few moments. We suspect a few other teams are in the area, so I stick a sensor dart in a nearby building, giving my team radar ping locations of nearby foes. Sadly, it reveals multiple teams are converging on our shack, and one of us gets a little too ambitious and goes down. As the circle moves in, more people die. The chopper ends up outside the circle, so one other survivor from the squad and I must continue on foot. We're among the last 10 remaining players.

The circle culls players quickly, as it was meant to. I get shot through a window by a sniper whose teammates distracted me with monkey bombs and smoke. Only two players were left, one of them being my teammate. Despite everyone else being dead, no one had left the game – we were all spectating. The intensity and tension inside final circles have a hypnotic effect, creating highly viewable situations that are almost like watching an unlucky victim open a door in a horror film, sucking in your breath and shouting, "Noooo don't do that!" as you witness miniscule actions that could change the game in a heartbeat.

One of the coolest unique items in Blackout is a consumable reconnaissance robot. It doesn't seem incredible at first, since it can't blow people up or collect items, but knowledge is power, and discovering that a player is hiding in a bed of bushes just over the hill north of your position can be the difference between a big win or a devastating defeat. Using the tiny bot takes you out of first person and leaves you vulnerable during the investigative process, so finding safe spot to do recon is an important part of the process.

My teammate is secretly scouted by the unobtrusive robotic contraption, giving the enemy an exact location for tossing a game-deciding flashbang. An unceremonious but epic end to the game occurs as a blinding light engulfs my teammate followed by a salvo of gunfire.

A game ends, a new game begins. They all have stories. They may not be a curated experience of mind-bending mayhem that Treyarch is known for, but there is a lot to be said about players creating their own memorable moments, cobbled together and crafted from the Blackout toolbox. That time when you ran a cargo truck over two fully geared players who were running for the circle. That time when you sniped a chopper pilot and brought down an entire enemy team skirting the edge of the play zone. These are sandbox-style stories being created every time, whether you go out in an early fistfight or epic vehicle battle.

I'm a few matches in now and starting to get the hang of things. The game runs smoothly for a pre-beta build, hovering right around 60 frames per second on the PlayStation 4 Pro. What's more, I start to discover new and interesting applications for the multiplayer abilities that turn into powerful consumables in Blackout. A sensor dart, for instance, is a simple tool on the surface – you just shoot it and it gives valuable radar information and shows enemy locations. But here in the open world, you can get far more imaginative. You can stick the dart on a car or a chopper to give you a mobile intelligence network and watch as it provides you information from far away. You can hole up in an attic as the circle dials down to nothing and make use of razor wire or trip mines. You can put a recon bot on a boat, send the boat far downriver, and end up with critical information before moving in with your actual team. I'm beginning to see all kinds of ways to interact with the environment and the various applications of the boatload of toys available in Blackout, and it's an enjoyable journey of discovery.

// POWERFUL PERKS AND CONSUMABLES

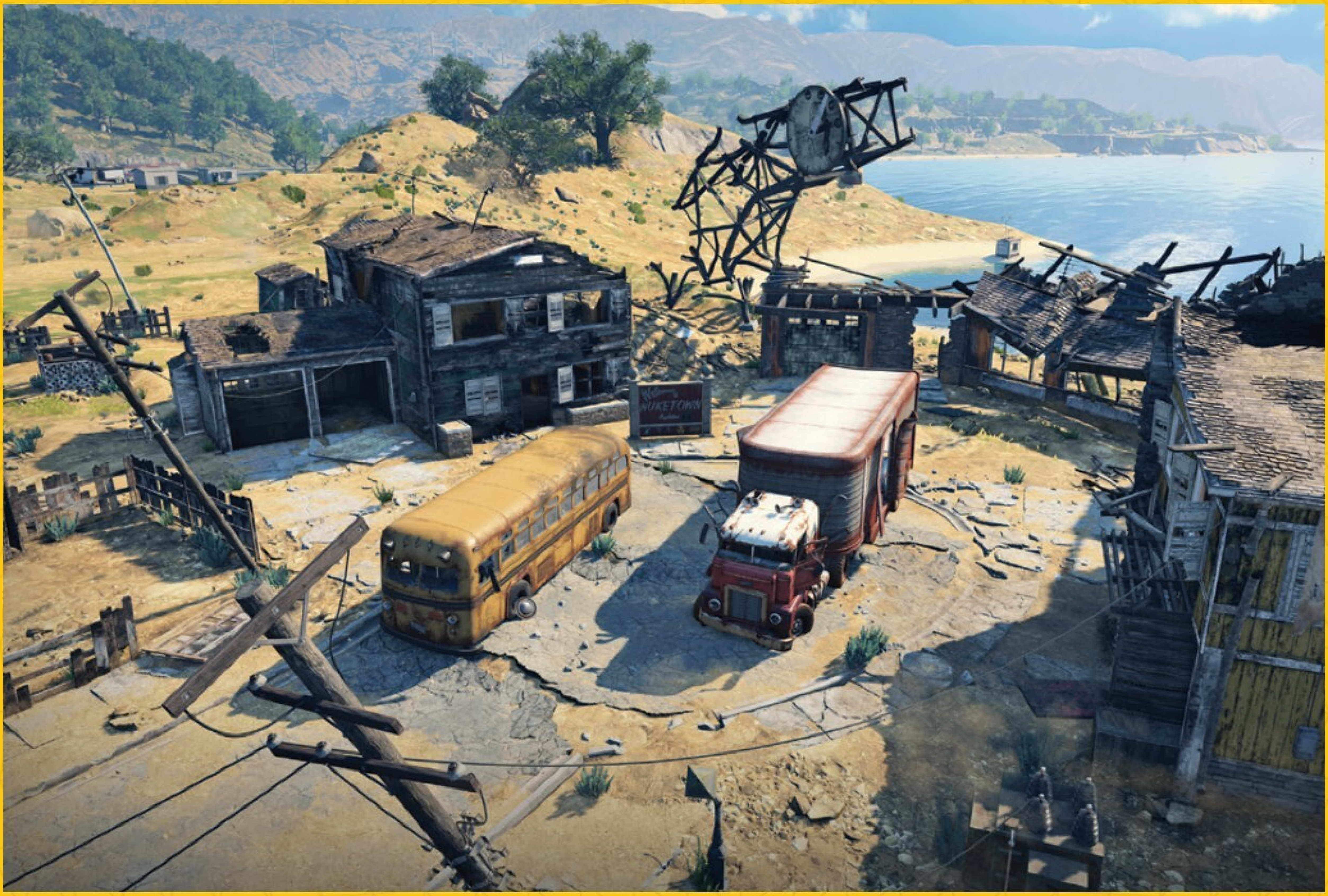
>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Blackout features some special perks that you won't find in standard multiplayer alongside tweaked versions of multiplayer perks. Check out some of the abilities you can use to get an edge on the battlefield.

- **Paranoia**
  Gives an audio alert when you're targeted by an enemy
- **Skulker**
  Move faster while crouched and prone
- **Stimulant**
  Increases max health by 100 points
- **Outlander**
  Reduced damage from circle. Increased speed while taking damage from circle
- **Looter**
  Reveal nearby stashes and items
- **Iron Lungs**
  Hold your breath longer while shooting sniper rifles or diving underwater
- **Consumer**
  Reduces time it takes to use items, heal, or revive teammates by 20 percent

Instead of being permanent boosts, the perks are consumable, with a set duration that usually lasts a few minutes, so timing usage is essential if you're hoping to win. Using a lot of perks early can give you an edge, but then you may find your supplies dry when you need them later in the final circle.

Many abilities from Black Ops 4 multiplayer, like grapple gun and cluster grenade, make their way into Blackout as consumables. A grapple gun may come with five charges, while a sensor dart may come with a single shot.



// LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The map has a number of named locales, and many should be familiar to Call of Duty veterans. Some are faithful recreations or expanded versions of classic locations in the Black Ops universe – even from Zombies mode. The map also has several new regions, like a fracking station and a skyscraper under construction that offers a great sniping vantage point.

Looking for a spot to hit? You can pull up the map at any time and place easy-to-spot markers at any point of interest you like. These are the most loot-rich destinations in Blackout, and the team says a certain northern coastal spot is likely to be next on the list.

Estates
The rich neighborhood has a giant helipad where a Little Bird can spawn. Good location if you want a shot at getting a chopper early.

Construction Site
The unfinished skyscraper has a ton of loot and lots of opportunities to base jump out of the high areas to safety if things get too hot.

Array
A few slices of elevation and play centered around the big relay dish make for a brutal warzone with lots of cover.

Nuketown Island
Lots of gear underground in the bunkers and lively action potential above ground, spurred on by a sign that identifies how many players are active here.

Firing Range
The hottest of the hot spots if you want instant action with plenty of players this is your go-to destination.

Hydro Dam
Big base jumps and deadly falls make up the critical point at the end of the map's lengthy forking river.

Asylum
You never know if you're going to run into zombies as well as other players landing here, and while an early zombie supply stash is tempting, undead interference during your early loot-and-scoot can be dangerous.

Cargo Docks
Lots of elevation changes, a ship to roam on, and a giant crane arm. Great place to pick up a boat spawn.

Factory
Lots of battles that go indoor/outdoor, with rooftop ambush action.

Fracking Tower
Tower located in a depression, highly exposed to the hills surrounding it.

Turbine
Bridge-to-bridge combat, large internal and exterior areas. Lots of desert and rocks to battle behind.

Rivertown
Urban combat, building to building fighting, perfect for close-range encounters. Only area on the map surrounded completely by water.

Train Station
Long sightlines and traincar-to-traincar combat.

ZOMBIE ROYALE
Battle royale games often have a hook to incentivize players to head in a particular direction on the map, a collision risk/reward scenario that gets the action moving. One of the major ways Blackout does this is by introducing A.I. zombies in designated regions. Instead of using an indicator on the map that zombies are spawning, a brilliant ray of light shines down on their active location, with up to two zombie spawn areas available at any given time. You need to pay attention to see where the zombies are, and then determine the risks of engagement, because the rewards can be sweet.

In the next round we head to one of these destinations, Asylum. Zombie spawns are manageable compared to traditional Zombies mode. Just a handful of them are active at a time, but killing them spends valuable ammunition, and the noise of your gunfire makes it easy for players to get the drop on you while you're occupied with the undead. Savvy players can easily move into critical sightlines or hammer you from behind while you're distracted. On the plus side, zombies drop loot and their active locations feature a coveted zombie supply stash, which can contain powerful and rare weapons and items like the Zweihander, ray gun, or monkey bombs. Engaging the undead is optional, as they are only available in tiny slices of the map at certain times. If you just want to forget they exist, you can. If you want to jump into a situation that's almost sure to have some action and maybe come out suited and booted, the blazing beam in the sky leads you to potential greatness.

Multiple teams and NPC ghouls are waiting for us when we start looting. Even in loot-rich areas like these, you can still end up vastly underprepared when 10-plus people are all scrambling to find weapons. The zombies add to the chaos, ripping chunks of health out of unarmed players. I scramble up the steps of the decrepit old building and grab a weapon. Turning around, I take out an enemy with a hail of gunfire, making sure I pump a few extra rounds into them after they're downed so their teammates can't resurrect them. Then I get an unfortunate good look at zombie interference, as a brain eater jumps into my line of fire just as one of the downed player's teammates rolls up the stairs and empties a weapon into me. He doesn't finish me off, since the zombies are messing with him, too. My team takes him out, picks me up, and shares some bandages which are easy to split from your inventory.

Player health starts at 150 in Blackout, but it can be enhanced to greater numbers with perks. Multiple health items are available, including basic bandages, trauma kits, and king-sized medkits. Quality varies, but there are no restrictions in terms of restoration. Unlike other battle royales, you can still use basic band aids to take you back to your health cap. Health items are critical and numerous.

FRACK
FRACK
FRACK
FRACK

Snagging a boat is the best way to get in and out of the isolated Rivertown

We're feeling especially saucy since this game kicked off with a big win at Asylum, so we press our luck and look for another great beam in the sky, each of which indicates another zombie den. On the way, I jump in the river to get a feel for how water works in Blackout. The river has a current, so you may struggle to swim upstream if you're navigating waters without a Zodiac watercraft. You can fire underwater just fine and mobility is still high, so you're not a sitting duck. In fact, hiding under bridges and taking a dip can be an effective defense for avoiding roaming choppers. We make it to the diner that the ray of light is shining down on and start slaughtering zombies. Ammo and other loot pop from their bodies as they drop. Of course, the prospect of a zombie stash attracts attention, and we find ourselves under heavy, long-range fire from a hilltop tree line.

Fortunately, I've got a sniper rifle, a nice scope, and a backpack (one size only) that gives me additional carrying capacity. I'm ready to pop some perks (which take up inventory space) and take on a team. Bullet drop is a factor in Blackout, and it takes me a few shots to dial in on a prone opponent obscured by a bush. Weapon damage has been slightly altered compared to multiplayer, a touch that makes fights last a little bit longer than usual. It makes sense, as there's a bit more invested in Blackout compared to modes where you can respawn instantly.

I down the hiding soldier with a few nicely placed shots from behind the diner. Instead of finishing off my *Enemy At The Gates* opponent, I stop firing, duck out of sight, and hope that one of my adversary's Good Samaritans falls for my ruse. The bait works, and another member of the enemy team shambles down the hill to help my fallen foe. Completely exposed and running downhill, a few well-placed shots later and they're down as well.

My intense sniper skirmish lasts less than a minute, with my teammates and the opposing team all scrambling around looking for cover and making plays of their own. While I was popping in and out of

Big battles often involve multiple vehicles and an assortment of weapons, abilities, and perks

// BLACKOUT BY THE NUMBERS

As it currently stands, Blackout has:

- **3 tiers of health and armor**
- **8 primary ammunition types**
- **12 equipment items**
- **17 consumable perks**
- **17 weapon attachments**
- **24 different weapons**
- **125 items**

These numbers could change before the game launches.

cover, my team had moved into a flanking position and gunned down the other opponents trying to lock down my position. We sift through the enemy satchels, loading up on health items, smoke, and ammo. Then we take off on a couple of ATVs toward the final circle. With only 17 players remaining and the whole crew still alive, things are looking great.

That changes pretty fast, as we get locked down in a tiny house with big windows, taking fire from multiple directions and multiple teams. We do a great job fighting back, with big losses suffered by all teams involved. By the time we get out of there, we're down to eight players in the game, two of them in my squad.

I wish I could say that we ended up taking the game, but in our frenzied effort to loot the pile of corpses and sprint to the final circle, our guard was down just long enough for a cargo truck to come plowing through, running my teammate over while slinging smoke and cluster bombs on me.

A NEW CONTENDER EMERGES

I played Blackout for over two hours, and the battles flew by. The pacing, the shooting, and the map size all feel great. The vehicles are awesome to roam around in, whether you're scouting, unleashing an aerial assault, making a mobile stockpile, or ripping down the river. Wingsuits and base jumping give you unparalleled mobility. Zombies provide a tension spike in the action and incentivize players to collide. I was initially concerned that many of the items were multiplayer abilities, but the grappling guns, sensor darts, razor wire, and barricades all have wild applications in battle royale.

Even at this pre-launch state, Treyarch says Blackout has undergone extensive changes. The map itself has been rebooted three times. The skyscraper was much, much taller – so tall people could get dizzy rushing up and down it. There was much more of a scavenging element, with players needing to assemble pieces to craft items like the grapple gun. All these changes are just the beginning. "Shipping is like halftime at a football game," Vonderhaar says. More characters, missions, items, weapons, and vehicles are all on the way.

The prospect of a constantly evolving living map and mode is tantalizing, and it already has me hooked. While other battle royale games have attempted to entrench themselves with first-mover advantage, Blackout is poised to be a powerful grenade hurled into those bunkers. After spending hundreds of hours in the genre, I walked away incredibly impressed with Blackout, and eager for more triple-chopper battles and zombie-interrupted duels. Paired with Zombies mode and the traditional competitive multiplayer suite, Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 looks to be primed for a big year. ◆

For more on Call of Duty: Black Ops 4, visit our hub at gameinformer.com/blackops4. You'll find information on Blackout, multiple zombie modes, features, exclusive interviews, and more

THE NEW WASTELA

Learn how Fallout 76 caters to players looking for both solo and multiplayer experiences

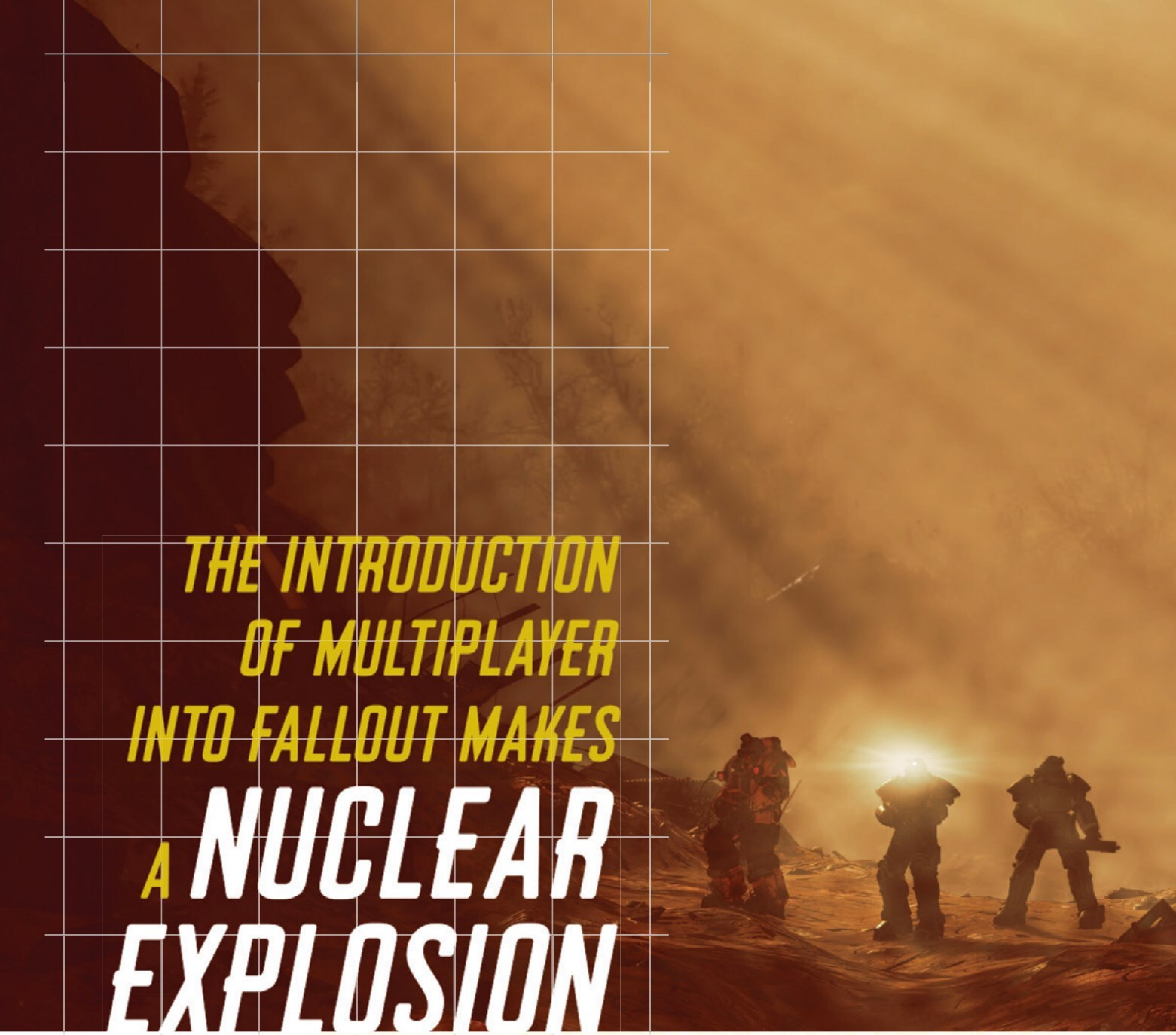
» PLATFORM
PS4, Xbox One, PC
» STYLE
24-Player Online Action/Role-Playing
» PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks
» DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios
» RELEASE
November 14

ND

M

Many of us view Fallout's irradiated wastelands as a home, a familiar place of comfort we've spent hundreds of hours exploring, conquering, and rebuilding. In Fallout 76, when we emerge from the vault on Reclamation Day, that feeling of returning to something well traveled will be replaced with the anxiety and uncertainty of something new. In that moment where you bask in the sunlight for the first time, you may see an entity that completely upends what you've come to expect from these games — another human player. This person may greet you with open arms and the intent of helping you find your footing in West Virginia's dangerous rolling hills, or this person could be a double-crossing snake lying in wait, looking for the right moment to sink their teeth into you.

BY ANDREW REINER



THE INTRODUCTION OF MULTIPLAYER INTO FALLOUT MAKES A NUCLEAR EXPLOSION SEEM LIKE THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES.

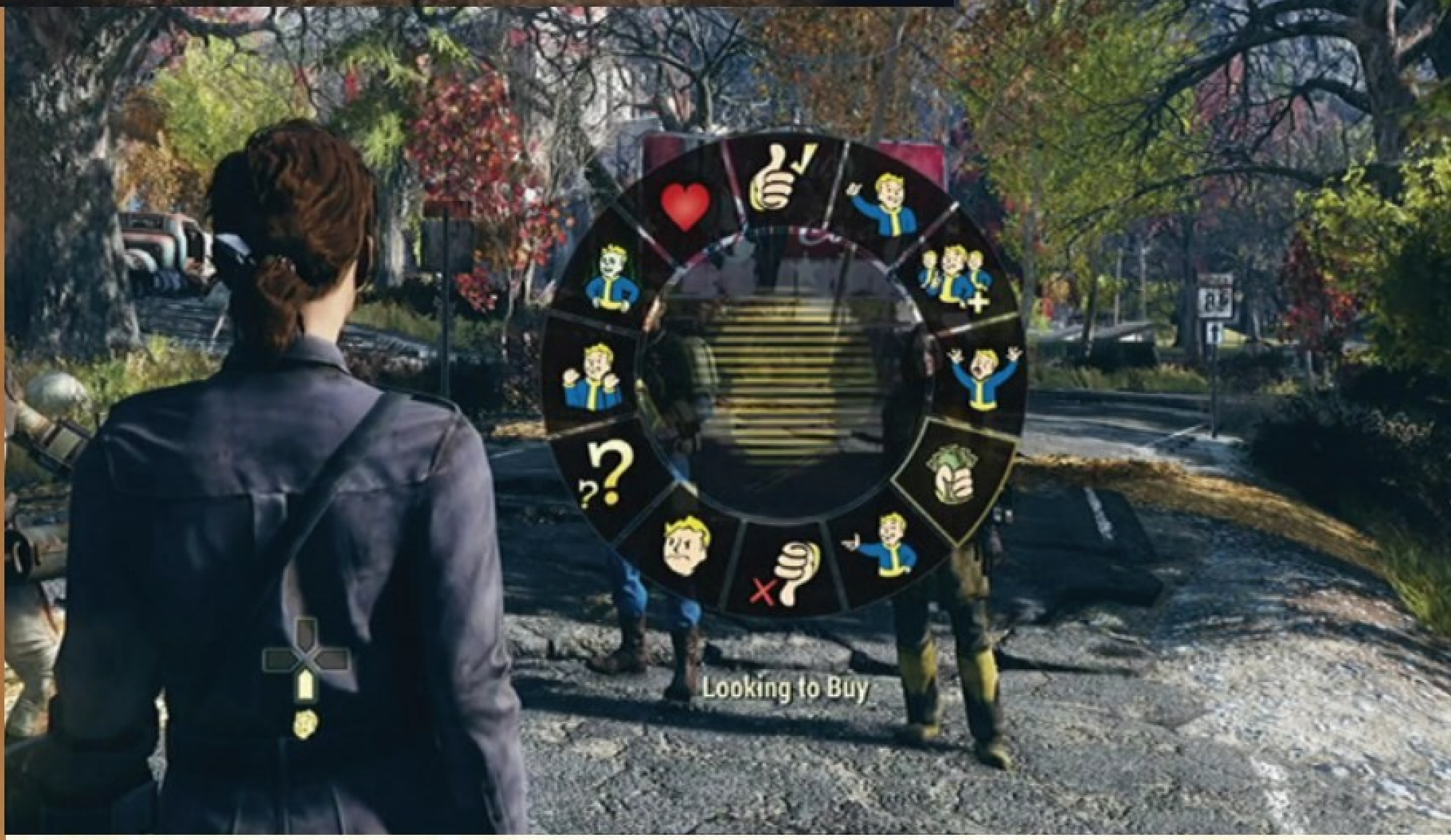
Thanks to a decade's worth of exploration in these games, we know how to shield ourselves from ionizing radiation. What we don't know is how to handle human contact, which may end up being the most unpredictable and hazardous element ever integrated into a Fallout game.

This new wrinkle has been met with mixed reactions from the Fallout community. Some are worried this series is losing its soul by adding multiplayer and moving away from traditional storytelling. Other players are counting the days until they can launch nukes at their friends' settlements.

Given the size of Fallout 76 and its impending release date, developer Bethesda Game Studios' has been surprisingly tightlipped when it comes to detailing what players can expect from this experience. The studio's focus has mostly been on communicating multiplayer, and the interactions players can have with one another – both for competitive and cooperative avenues.

Outside of game director Todd Howard saying Fallout 76 is "80 percent the Fallout everyone is used to, and the other 20 percent is really different," Bethesda hasn't painted a full picture for players.

I recently sat down with the development team to find out what makes Fallout 76 tick, and can now confidently communicate exactly what it is. If you simply want another solo Fallout experience, Bethesda is making this game for you. If you desire a Fallout game that you can enjoy with your closest friends, Bethesda also has you covered. If you want an RPG with with PvP and instances, put Fallout 76 on your radar. The game embraces all of these styles of play, and you have a direct hand in determining how much of any given one you experience.



Radiation exposure can now lead to freak mutations, like players gaining the ability to jump higher at the sacrifice of their strength decreasing

THE RPG YOU KNOW

Fallout 76 isn't a single-player game, but it can be played solo with the caveat that you will eventually run into other players. Anything could happen at that point. They could stop to say "hi," raise a gun at you, or completely ignore you. No matter what happens, you have the ability to ignore them.

Howard saying "Every character you see is a real human" is true to a point, but there's another way to interpret this: Every "human" you see is a human. They aren't the only intelligent beings in the wasteland. You will run into other "characters" that are controlled by A.I., such as robots. Some of these individuals are enemies you have to deal with, but others are mission givers. A few may even be vendors who you can barter with.

The big difference between Fallout 76 and the other games in the series is you don't engage in conversation with most of the NPCs. You still hear what they have to say, but you don't have dialogue choices to steer the conversation or mission in a different way. Bethesda likely has a number of colorful NPCs that players will grow fond of, but they hope the most interesting beings in the wasteland end up being the other human players. They want them to be the real storytellers.

Although Bethesda has talked at length about Fallout 76 being a survival experience that pushes players to keep their hunger and thirst in check, it is still a game driven by quests. When you emerge from the vault, you receive a transmission from the Overseer. "She left before everybody," Howard says. "She left secret instructions for you, and that's kind of the jumping-on point for what we call the main quest. At the end of it, you launch the nukes. The nukes are a game system, but they are also part of the main story."

This Overseer's quest is not something you can blaze through; it's a lengthy, multipart story that takes players across West Virginia. This quest requires the player to be a high level at its conclusion. Even if the player sticks to this quest, they will still receive optional tasks along the way, and will end up having a menu filled with missions that can be selected at any time. "Given the nature of the game, you can jump ahead in parts and go back to others," Howard adds.

Quests are not just gained by NPCs. Players can find them embedded in holotapes, notes, terminals, and may even gain one by simply being in the proximity of a notable location. Fallout 76 project lead Jeff Gardiner says the development team didn't want players to simply run past great content. "You'll wander near something, and will be alerted of a quest, like 'explore this mine,'" he says. "In the past, we thought that was maybe a little gamey, but we want you to find it. We're being very proactive with where this content is. You'll have a lot to do very quickly."

The world is four times larger than Fallout 4's play space, and is brought to life with 16 times the graphical fidelity. Given the vastness of terrain players can explore, the points of interest are spread out, meaning you won't find as many things crammed into one particular area. That said, there are more things to see and do than any other Fallout before it. Gardiner jokingly says it's a "scary amount of stuff."

Bethesda knows mod support will be difficult in an online game like Fallout 76, but is dedicated to figuring out how to make them possible

Almost everything you engage with nets you experience points. After enough experience is accumulated, you'll eventually level up. Bethesda doesn't want to put a level cap on this game, as it intends to reward players well for reaching level milestones. When you first start out and leave the vault, you'll reach level two. At this point, you are asked to pick which S.P.E.C.I.A.L. ability you would like to increase. S.P.E.C.I.A.L is an acronym for Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck – the skill-based system used in all Fallout games.

After one of these is selected, the player picks which perk they would like to assign to that particular trait. If you give a point to Strength, you can add either a Gladiator card, which gives you a 10-percent boost in one-handed melee weapons, or a Thru-Hiker card, which reduces food and drink weights by 30 percent. On the next level, if you pick the Gladiator card again, you will level it to rank two, which gives you a 20 percent boost.

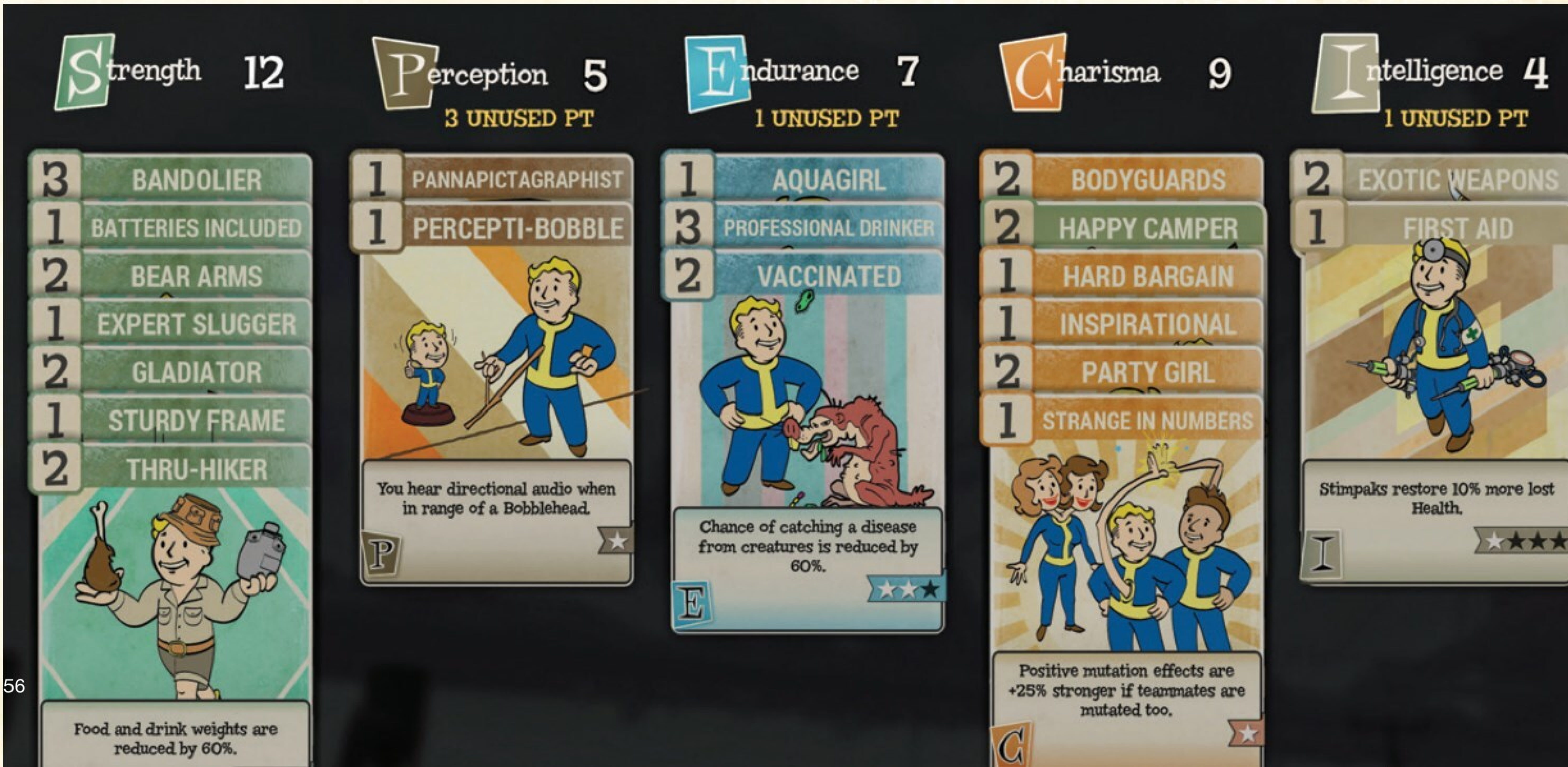
As you continue leveling up, more cards become available, and you'll even receive perk card packs. Each pack mimics Topps baseball cards of old, containing four random cards, a joke, and a stick of gum that, when chewed, reduces your hunger for a while. When you reach higher levels, the frequency of the packs drops from every two levels gained to five. You can continue feeding points into S.P.E.C.I.A.L. until rank 50. After that, each new level rewards you with just cards.

"There are hundreds of cards," Howard says. "They all rank up, and there are gold versions of each. Fallout 4 and Skyrim's [skill systems] were really great, but when we got into the DLC, we said, 'Let's add skills or perks.' We looked at them, and said, 'Where? The rules are so strict.' The cards allow us to be very flexible moving forward. We can release new perks with events we are doing, and also have themed perks."

The cards allow you to manage most things in the game. The Slow Metabolizer card does exactly what you would expect in satisfying hunger by an extra 15 percent. The Scrounger card increases your chance of finding extra ammo by 50 percent. The Pannapictagraphist card lets you hear directional audio when in range of a magazine. You will never mutate from rads with the Starched Genes card, but it also won't cure a mutation if a Radaway is used. Since conversations aren't a part of this experience, Charisma's cards are designed to give team bonuses as opposed to NPC influence. Charisma cards range from giving your team the ability to run 10 percent faster to your stimpacks also healing nearby teammates for half the normal strength.

Cards are not obtained in any way through microtransactions. Again, you can only earn them through leveling. We don't know if they can be traded yet, but you can share one card with your team. That card gives bonuses to everyone.

As you log hours into this RPG, you have the flexibility to change who you are, not by just which cards you use (you could have a stealth build for infiltration, a PvP build, team build, solo build, etc.), but the look of your character. You can completely alter your hair, skin, and facial features at any time. One of the first tasks in the game is to take a photo of yourself for an ID badge. The camera becomes an item you'll have at all times, allowing for photos to be taken anywhere.


Strength 12
3 BANDOLIER
1 BATTERIES INCLUDED
2 BEAR ARMS
1 EXPERT SLUGGER
2 GLADIATOR
1 STURDY FRAME
2 THRU-HIKER
Perception 5
3 UNUSED PT
1 PANNAPICTAGRAPHIST
1 PERCEPTI-BOBBLE
P
Endurance 7
1 UNUSED PT
1 AQUAGIRL
3 PROFESSIONAL DRINKER
2 VACCINATED
E
Charisma 9
2 BODYGUARDS
2 HAPPY CAMPER
1 HARD BARGAIN
1 INSPIRATIONAL
2 PARTY GIRL
1 STRANGE IN NUMBERS
C
Intelligence 4
1 UNUSED PT
2 EXOTIC WEAPONS
1 FIRST AID
I

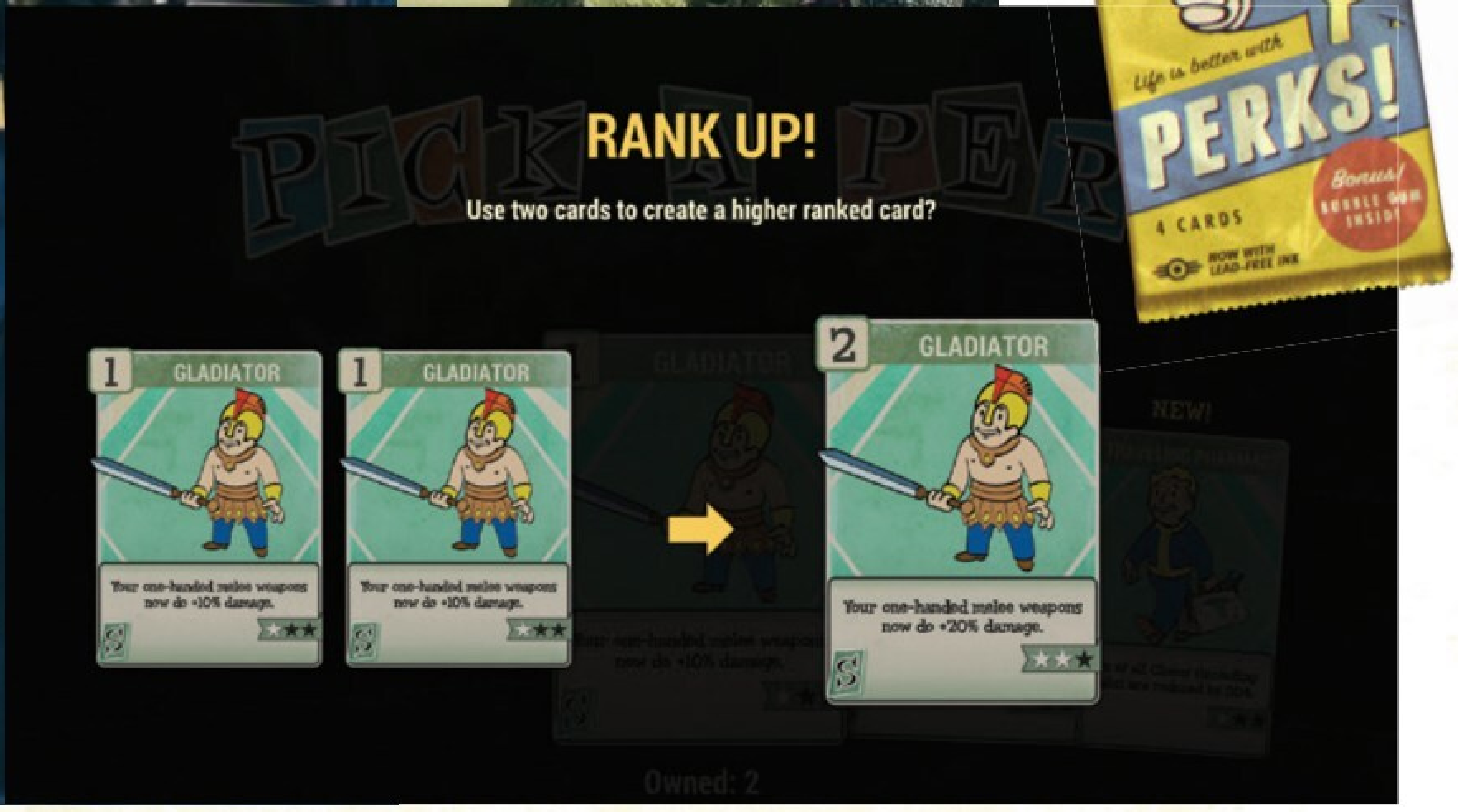
Food and drink weights are reduced by 60%.

You hear directional audio when in range of a Bobblehead.

Chance of catching a disease from creatures is reduced by 60%.

Positive mutation effects are +25% stronger if teammates are mutated too.

Stimpaks restore 10% more lost Health.



PICK A PERK

RANK UP!

Use two cards to create a higher ranked card?

1 GLADIATOR — Your one-handed melee weapons now do +10% damage.

1 GLADIATOR — Your one-handed melee weapons now do +10% damage.

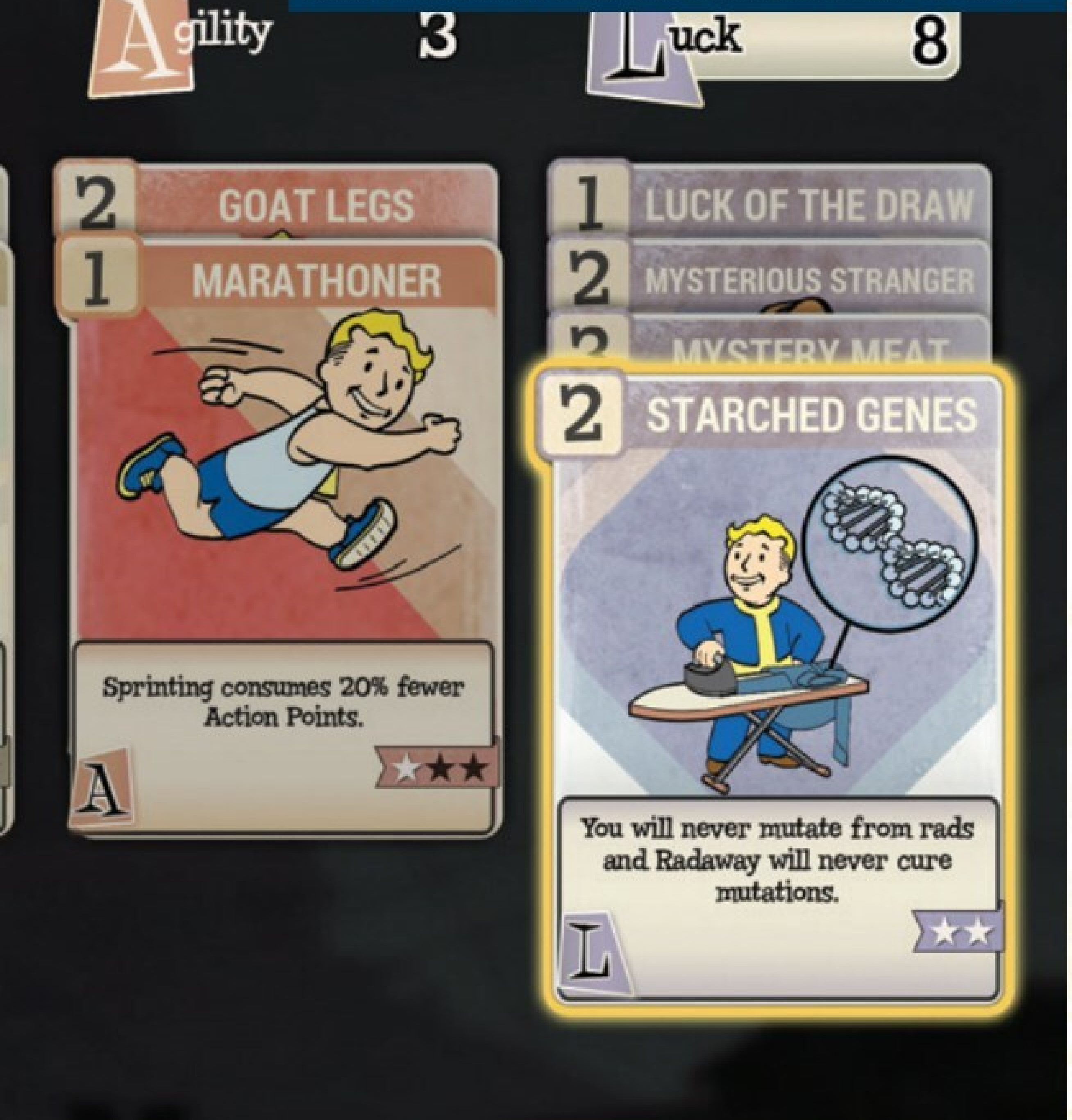
2 GLADIATOR — Your one-handed melee weapons now do +20% damage.

NEW!

Owned: 2

Pete Hines, Bethesda's senior vice president of global marketing and communications, says he loves Fallout 76's multiplayer aspects, but has recently played it solo, and is finding it to be a fascinating experience. "I know it was a concern in our community, and it was a concern for me because I play solo a lot [in games]. Given my schedule, it's hard to find times to group up with folks. With my current character, my plan was, 'I'm walking out of the vault, and I'm going left. I haven't been over there before and I don't know what's there. Let's see what happens.' I came across some super mutants and got in a big fight with them, completed a few quests, and found this one location outside of a pharmaceutical plant that seemed like an awesome place for a camp. It had a good view from up on top of a mountain. I figured not a lot of people could see me up there. I've been using that base camp to go off and do quests."

S.P.E.C.I.A.L is now a card-based system. Players can collect hundreds of cards, each offering a different ability or bump



Agility 3

Luck 8

2 GOAT LEGS

1 MARATHONER — Sprinting consumes 20% fewer Action Points.

1 LUCK OF THE DRAW

2 MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

2 MYSTERY MEAT

2 STARCHED GENES — You will never mutate from rads and Radaway will never cure mutations.

PLAYING WITH FRIENDS

Fallout 76 allows players to be lone wanderers who never interact with anyone, but it's designed with multiplayer in mind, and offers a wide selection of activities for players who either team up with other players or decide to gun them down. You can boot up a game with your closest friends to take on quests, build settlements, and engage in events.

Events are something new to the Fallout experience. "When you get near one, it starts broadcasting for help," Howard says. "It's like a timed multiplayer quest." As you explore the world, you'll be alerted of them occurring nearby, or you may see some appear on your map. Most are geared for teams, but some may require more players converge on an area. Bethesda doesn't want to reveal exactly what we can expect from the events, but we do know some appear at random times and places, whereas others appear in specific places and at specific times. Once you discover one, you can fast travel to it.

Gardiner detailed one of the smaller events players could possibly come across. "You'll get a call about robots in distress, and you basically have to go and escort them to various locations," he says. "If they live in the end, you get a reward. That's a random [event] that will spawn. Some people will join you or not. The robots have a lot of character, and they are sort of the levity [of the mission]. You'll follow along and they'll make little comments to you."

Gardiner noted events often give the best rewards. If you're looking for better loot and don't have a firm grasp of crafting yet, you'll want to engage in events. That means becoming a part of the multiplayer experience, as most can't be completed solo.

Up to four people can team up together. All of the content factors in the group dynamic, even quests. The team leader can queue up a mission, which every party member sees and can engage in if they so choose. Should you get separated from your friends, or need to travel great distances to your settlement or a hub to resupply your gear, you can immediately fast travel back to any one of your teammates.

This Fallout experience is a bit harsher in terms of how the world is structured. "It's more of a zoned game and more level-jumped than our previous stuff," Howard says.

THE BEAST OF GRAFTON
AVE
GREA
DAY

West Virginia is a place rich in folklore. Bethesda is pulling from some of those stories. We'll have to wait until the game ships to know which stories make the cut, but players could conceivably run into the Mothman, Snarly Yow, Snallygaster, and the Grafton Monster

"Some of the feedback we've gotten is, 'I'm just going to run across the map. I died. It got hard.' There's a reason for that. We have higher-level zones." That's not to say that the game won't factor in your level. If you enter a zone, things may spawn between level 40 and 60, depending on your level. If you enter that area at a lower level, well, you're in for a hell of a fight. If you are in a group, the first player in sets the level ranges. If that player leaves the area, the next player in changes the level. Bethesda says the game is divided into six regions, but wouldn't give specifics for each. Howard did say the cranberry bogs are "really, really hard."

While teams are limited to just four players, you can technically play with other people on your system's list. You just can't group up with them in the game. Don't expect to see people everywhere. "It's definitely not an MMO with hundreds of players running around a server," says development director Chris Mayer. "We have 24 players on one server on a map that's four times the size of Fallout 4. There will be times you see other players, but we hope it's not something that's commonplace."

If you're thinking of creating a private server for 24 of your closest friends, Mayer says Fallout 76 isn't launching with private servers. Is there a chance you can join a faction that may support a larger number of people? "We'll answer that later," Howard says with a smile.

SAINT OR MURDERER?

Every person at Bethesda I talked to says one of the scariest moments in Fallout 76 is hearing a gunshot off in the distance. "You don't know if that's another player," Howard says. Do you investigate the origin of the shot, or run away from it? It could be anything: enemies battling for territory, or perhaps another player in need.

If you have the courage to investigate where the shot came from and it ends up being another player, you can use a chat wheel to communicate with them in a basic way, or if you have a headset, talk verbally if you are close to them. Chances are they mean you harm, but you don't have to retaliate. If they shoot you, they'll do minimal damage. "It's like slapping someone in the bar," Howard says. You won't do much damage to another player until they fire back at you. When a bullet exchange is made, the duel is officially underway, and your next shot will do full damage.

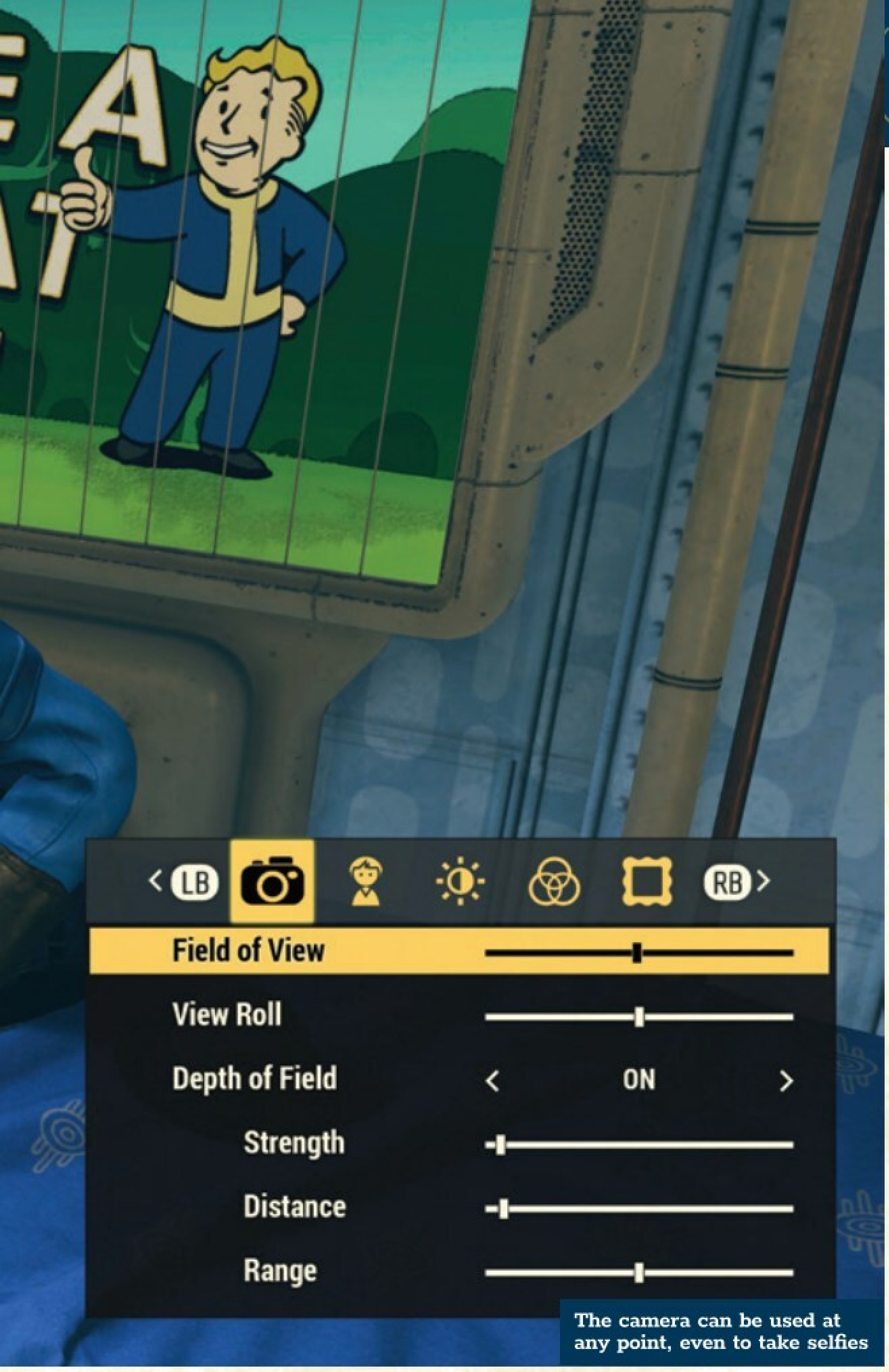
Victors receive a cap reward based on their level. If you lose and feel like you can fare better the next time, you can seek revenge for double the reward.

If someone kills you, yet you never engaged in combat, they are going to be in for a world of hurt. "We like to turn that into a dramatic moment," Howard says wryly to a crowd during a QuakeCon panel. "The player that kills somebody that didn't want to engage in it becomes a wanted murderer. They get no reward, no caps, no XP, nothing for becoming a wanted murderer except for the social incentive people have online to be a--holes. What do we do with that? We turn the a--holes into interesting content. They appear on your map as a red star. Everybody sees them and they have a bounty on their head. That bounty comes out of their own caps."

Since Fallout 76 is always online, players can't freeze time through the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System (better known as VATS). That doesn't mean you have to rely solely on twitch reflexes to down your foes. VATS is still an option,

NUKE TIME

As you carve out a new life for yourself in West Virginia, there may come a day where you look up to the sky to see a nuke heading your way. This weapon will obliterate your home, take your life, and radiate the area for a length of time. All is not lost however, your settlement is blueprinted and can be rebuilt. Nukes are obtained at the main campaign's conclusion, and players can also track down launch codes for different silos by scouring the world. In an E3 video, a ghoul officer drops a "Silo Alpha Code Piece R-8." If you are short a code, one of your friends may have the piece you need. You can combine them to send the nuke flying. What's the benefit of nuking someone? The impact zone holds rare drops and even more powerful radiated beasts. Just make sure you bring the proper protection into these areas.



Field of View
View Roll
Depth of Field ON
Strength
Distance
Range

The camera can be used at any point, even to take selfies

allowing players to pick targets and specify which limbs they are aiming at.

Getting killed in games is often stressful, but the penalty in Fallout 76 isn't that bad. You're only going to lose your junk – the radios, fans, and garbage you pick up with the intent of recycling. The name "junk" makes it seem meaningless, but it's also the lifeline of camp building. The person that killed you will likely run off with your junk, but if you die against A.I., you can return to the location of your death to pick up the stash you lost.

"When you are doing group events, we turn off the [PvP]," Gardiner says. "If all of these random people are fighting a giant monster, you don't want to get hit by a stray bullet and then be in PvP. We wanted to make it an intentional thing." If you accidentally hit someone with a stray bullet outside of these zones and don't want to trigger PvP, you can wave a pacifist flag to shut it down. Griefers also can't camp out in front of Vault 76 to pick off new players. The PvP gameplay is not available until you reach level five.

REBUILDING AMERICA

The best way to survive in Fallout 76 is to build a settlement rich in workbenches, farm fields, and harvesters. You can build your home almost anywhere, but a scenic view may not be the best location, as you gain more benefits placing it near a resource deposit.

"There's a lot more harvesting," Howard adds. "We have harvesters and things like that for regenerating resources. It's machinery. If you find a deposit of aluminum, you can harvest those resources."

If you gain enough at that one deposit and want to move your camp, the game automatically blueprints everything you made, allowing you to pick it up and move it wherever you want. Other players can do your camp harm, but since you have that blueprint, you can easily rebuild it exactly the same.

You also don't have to fear what happens to your settlement when you log off of the game. Your camp magically vanishes from the world at the exact second your character does.

"It's different than Ark and games like that because you're not picking a server," Howard says. "It's better for us and the people playing to keep their progression by jumping around [to different servers]."

The camp building should be familiar to anyone who played Fallout 4, offering similar functionality for how electricity works and components click together. If you play the game cooperatively, your team can help you build your base. You can even connect settlements with everyone in your party to make a larger space, although each player needs to be online to have their part of the settlement appear in the world. "We had one test, where a dozen people built their camps next to each other and created an enormous city," Mayer says.

Each player builds one home base, but there are also public workshop spaces that you'll come across. Howard says they almost feel like event zones. "It's a space you can take over that has a lot of supplies. You and the people on your team can build there. There's gameplay with resource generation. There are enemy waves that attack these spots." This camp is temporary, however. When you leave, another team can roll in to claim it as their own.

As you begin to level up and your base is flush with resources, you won't worry about hunger and thirst as much anymore. You've basically mastered that system, and find yourself moving on to the next dangers, like radiation and toxic air.

Your camp can also be a haven for other players not in your team, although Bethesda is still trying to figure out exactly how this will play out. You can walk up to someone else's camp and harvest their plants. You can't go through their stashes, but you can get some things that regenerate. Right now, it's a crime to take fruits and vegetables, and you'll find yourself in trouble. That may change by the time the game launches. One thing you won't have to worry about is the power armor. In Fallout 4, if it ran out of juice, you had to climb out of it, leave it, and return with a new battery. The power armor is now treated like an inventory item rather than a vehicle. You still get in and out of it, but you can now pick it up.

Fallout 76 doesn't hit stores until November 14, but players will get a chance to play it in October through the cleverly named Break-it Early Test Application beta. "It's going to break – we're pretty sure of that," Howard says. As of this writing, the game is content complete, and the development team is currently squashing all of the bugs and exploits it can find before the beta hits.

For a decade, the Fallout series has carried the tag of "War. War never changes." With other players now a part of the equation, there's a chance the war in the wasteland will be dramatically different, hopefully making it an even more engaging experience.

"Usually when we finish a game, we're pretty sick of it, Howard admits. "We don't want to see it again. With this one, because of the other players, we're really excited to play it when it's out. That's when it's really alive." ◆

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Sakurai sheds light on his miserable pile of secrets

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Fighting (Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco Studios, Sora Ltd.

» **Release**
December 7

Putting the word Ultimate at the end of the title of an entry in an established franchise is a bold move. It implies this singular entry is the culmination of everything leading up to it. You need confidence to use a title like that, and this latest entry in the Smash Bros. series seems to be living up to the name.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate features every fighter that has ever appeared in the series, plus several newcomers, more than 100 different stages, and about 28 hours of music. This makes Ultimate a comprehensive package, and each bit of news we gather from game director Masahiro Sakurai only grows the scope.

At E3, Sakurai tempered expectations about the number of new fighters that would appear in the game, reminding everyone how difficult it is to balance a game with more than 60 fighters. Despite that caution, Nintendo recently revealed five new fighters. Castlevania hero Simon Belmont appears in the game for the first time alongside an "echo," a fighter who has an identical moveset, in the form of Richter Belmont. Richter plays similarly to Simon, but has his own voice and distinct animations.

Both fighters use Castlevania's iconic whip as a main weapon. The standard whip attack is strong, but leaves the Belmonts open without defense for a short period of time. Sakurai says the whip may have the longest reach of any fighter's melee attack, and they can spin the whip to counter projectile attacks. The duo also has special attacks like the ax, cross, and holy water. Their Final Smash is called Grand Cross, which locks opponents in a coffin before pummeling them with a series of attacks and launching them into space.

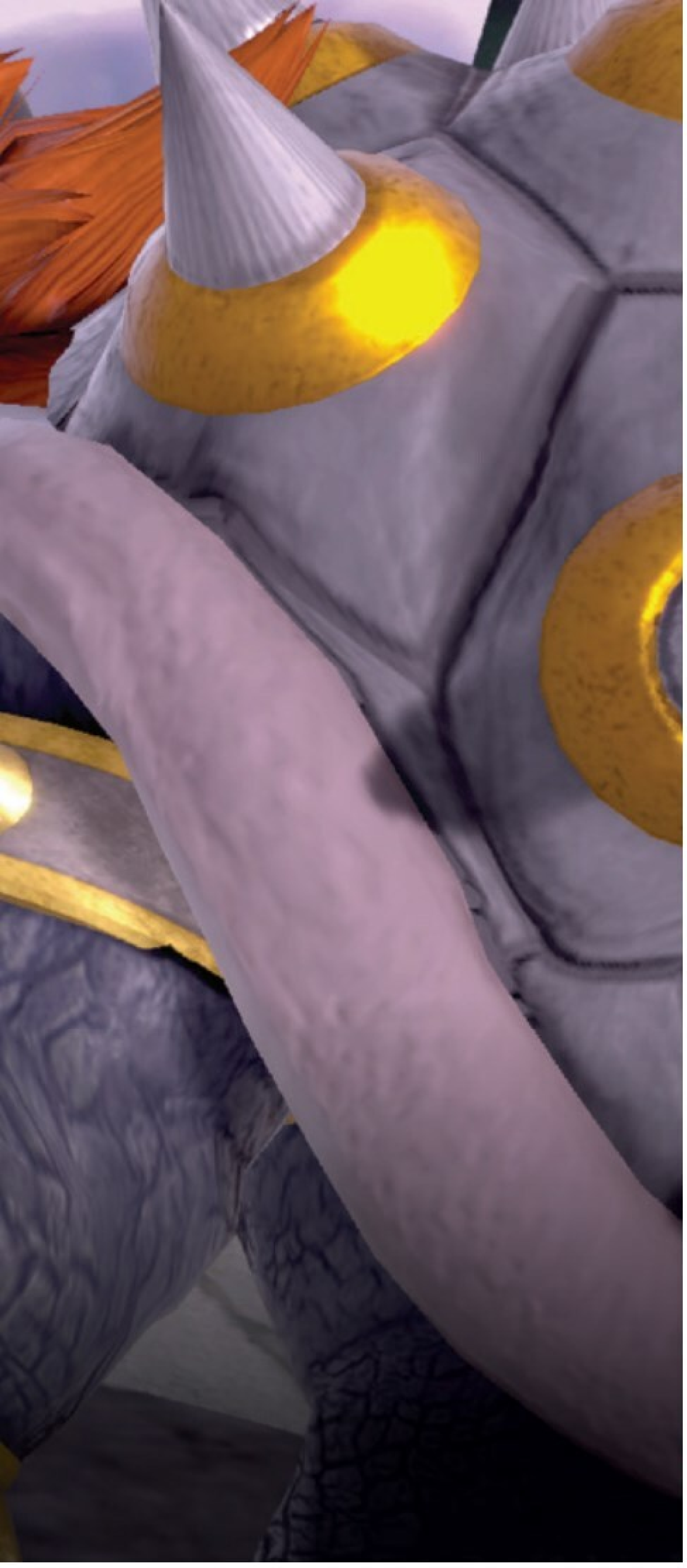
Bosses and enemies from Castlevania also appear in the new Dracula's Castle stage. Items drop from the stage's candlesticks when they're attacked (just like they do in the source games) and there are lots of enemy cameos. Dracula, Medusa, Mummy, the creature (a.k.a. Frankenstein), Flea Man, Werewolf, Carmilla, and Death all appear in the stage, and Nintendo strongly teased an appearance by Kid Dracula from the 1993 Game Boy game. One final Castlevania cameo, Alucard, appears in the game as an Assist Trophy wielding Symphony of the Night's most powerful sword, the Crissaegrim.

Dark Samus, an echo of Samus from Metroid, was also revealed alongside another echo, Chrom from Fire Emblem. Chrom's movest is based on Fire Emblem peer Roy, but he also has a few of Ike's attacks, as well.

Arguably the biggest surprise reveal was King K. Rool, the antagonist and final boss from Donkey Kong Country. Far from a household name, Rool is a fighter fans have been demanding for some time without much confidence of him actually appearing. After he was revealed, one of his original creators, Gregg Mayles, tweeted his excitement at seeing him in Super Smash Bros, writing, "Maybe I should have spent a bit more than five minutes coming up with his slightly rubbish name."

Rool is a heavy fighter who can throw his crown like he did in his original boss fight. He can also use his musket (and wear his pirate hat) from Donkey Kong Country 2, and use his helicopter backpack from Donkey Kong Country 3. His stomach is powerful and can used to slam enemies or counter powerful attacks.

New Smash fighter reveals are always the most exciting, but Sakurai had plenty of other details to offer, teasing a new mysterious mode



prominent enough to take up a large slot on the main menu. Ultimate has built-in bracketed tournament options, a dedicated training stage that offers all kinds of additional stats and details, a mode that lets players charge their Final Smashes as opposed to fighting over the Smash Ball, and another mode switches the stage in the middle of the match.

New Pokémon are planned for the game, like Ditto, who copies your opponent and fights as them; the Alolan Exeggutor, who acts like a giant climbable pole; and Mimikyu, who swallows enemies. Nintendo also revealed New Assist Trophies, like Zero from Mega Man X, Knuckles, Shovel Knight, the moon from Majora's Mask (who crashes into the stage), and plenty more.

Super Smash Bros. has grown exponentially with each release. In retrospect, I don't know how we derived so much fun from the Nintendo 64's paltry 12 characters and nine versus stages in 1999. Everything we've seen about Ultimate so far makes us believe it should live up to its subtitle, and Sakurai continues to imply we still haven't seen everything.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

You would think in the 24 years since his debut in Donkey Kong Country, King K. Rool would have found some time to get his left eye looked at. Hopefully he has at least one fight with Dr. Mario

Doom Eternal

Id's super-charged sequel impresses in its debut

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Bethesda

» Developer
id Software

» Release
2019

In the 2016 Doom reboot, players learned quickly that they should never stay still. The slightest hesitation could lead to a Hell Knight lopping off their head or a Revenant pelting them with a missile barrage. The excessive amounts of gore and a pounding heavy metal soundtrack painted a gritty tone, but the play was all about finesse, conservation, and thinking ahead to chain together kills. Developer id Software empowered players with a deep arsenal to create strategies allowing for each demon to be taken down quickly and efficiently. Some were turned into a bloody soup by the powerful combat shotgun, others were sliced into ribbons by the chainsaw.

For the sequel, Doom Eternal, id is sticking to its guns in terms of combat flow, but is expanding its scope to incorporate a wider array of weapons, and a surprisingly diverse move set for the Doom Slayer. At this year's QuakeCon, id gave a raucous crowd a lengthy taste of what to expect from Doom Eternal. As the auditorium dimmed and the screen burst to life, the heavy metal kicked in. Within seconds, the Slayer was surgically dissecting waves of demons with speed, fluidity, and a bunch of new toys.

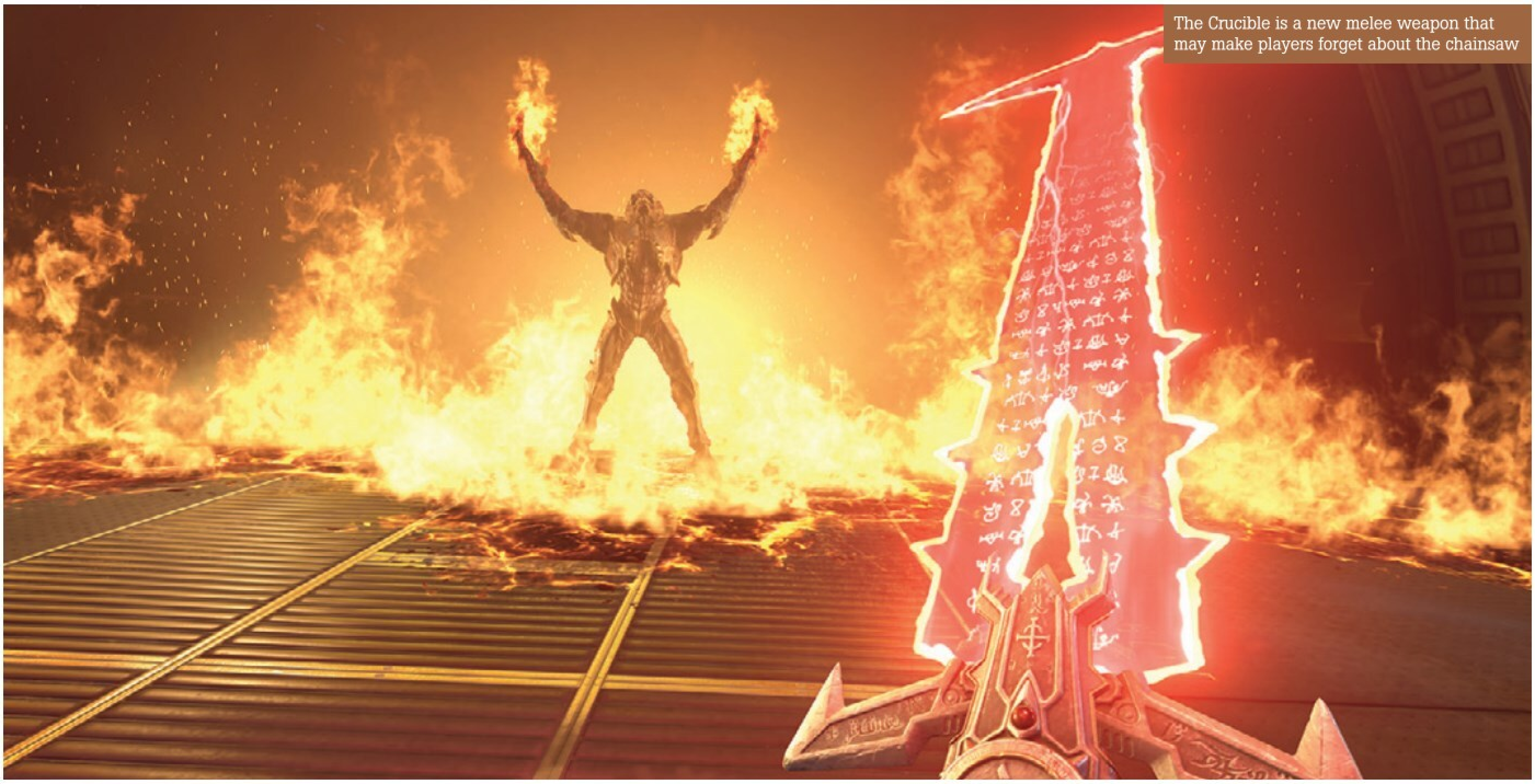
The Slayer is an ancient warrior who has been battling the forces of Hell for decades, and although he always wears green armor, he continues to upgrade it. This time around, he's added an extendable blade that can be used to slice open giant beasts during glory kill moments, and an over-the-shoulder launcher that can be equipped with missiles and grenades, and even a flamethrower. He's also found new ways to mod some of his long-favorite weapons, like the super shotgun, which now boasts something called the meat hook, a grapple that can pull the Slayer closer to an enemy. As the Slayer is quickly being yanked toward his foe, he can detach the hook and use the momentum he's gained to fling himself to higher ground.

The speed of movement in Doom 2016 was already fast, especially when rune power-ups were in play. In the Eternal gameplay clips shown, the Slayer moves significantly faster than before, and can even tap into a new dash maneuver to quickly dart in any direction. He can also interact with the environment in new ways, such as digging his hands into walls to quickly climb them, or perform a monkey-bar swing off of protruding metal poles.

These new abilities led to id making expanded environments. "If the race-car gets faster, then the racetrack has to get bigger," says creative director Hugo Martin. "That's basically it. Talking about our traversal combos, you can double jump, dash, monkey bar swing, use the meat hook, and then wall climb – [those moves] make the ambient spaces more dynamic. Having the tools in place as game designers allows for some really interesting moments, and that includes combat."

Much of the fun of Doom Eternal's combat will be getting to know a number of new or revamped weapons, such as a ballista, a redesigned rocket launcher, plasma rifle, and a sci-fi sword named the Crucible. These new death-dealing devices will be used against twice as many enemies as the previous game, which include some fan favorites from Doom games of old like the Arachnotron, Pain Elemental, and Arch-vile. Most of these enemies feature weaknesses, such as the Slayer being able to destroy the Archnotron's giant gun, or pick away at specific limbs or hit zones to quiet enemies' abilities.

Executive producer Marty Stratton says everything you see in the game has a meaning and story. "We haven't really put [the lore] out there where people can be a part of it. That's what I love about story games, stuff like Elder Scrolls. They put it out there where people can get it at varying levels. We want to bring people into that conversation a little bit more. We think what we have is exciting." Doom isn't becoming a story driven experience – the combat is still front and center, but should players want to know more about the demons, the people they meet along the way, and how Hell is erupting on Earth, they can find answers, some hidden in codices, others along the critical path.



The Crucible is a new melee weapon that may make players forget about the chainsaw

The expanded focus on story is a part of something id calls the Doom Universe. This name also reveals another big change for the series; it's exploring more of the cosmos. In one gameplay clip, we were given a brief look at the Martian moon of Phobos, a technologically advanced place that the UAC is using to wage war against Hell. Placed on its surface is a skyscraper-sized version of the BFG called the BFG 10,000. It looks like the gun the Slayer would wield in his hands, but is fastened to the ground and pointed to the sky to fire powerful green energy blasts at something id doesn't want to show yet.

The Slayer will likely do most of the killing in Doom Eternal, but id is painting the picture that he's just one solider in a war of millions. In every environment we saw – whether it was Phobos or an Earthen city being invaded by demons – large-scale conflicts unfolded on the streets and in the skies. This is one game you won't want to stop moving in, yet id clearly wants you to marvel at your surroundings at least for a few seconds.

Players should also prepare for some unexpected surprises, such as other players being able to join their game. Much like the Dark Souls series, they won't necessarily lend a helping hand. When another player enters your game as a demon of their choosing, you're alerted of an invasion. That incoming player then becomes an enemy who is determined to take you down. Players can also join up with friends to create a larger invasion force, which will likely lead to chaos and the Slayer having to pull out all of the stops to combat this new threat. He has some extra ammo in the form of retrievable extra life tokens that will immediately resurrect him should he succumb to the invasion.

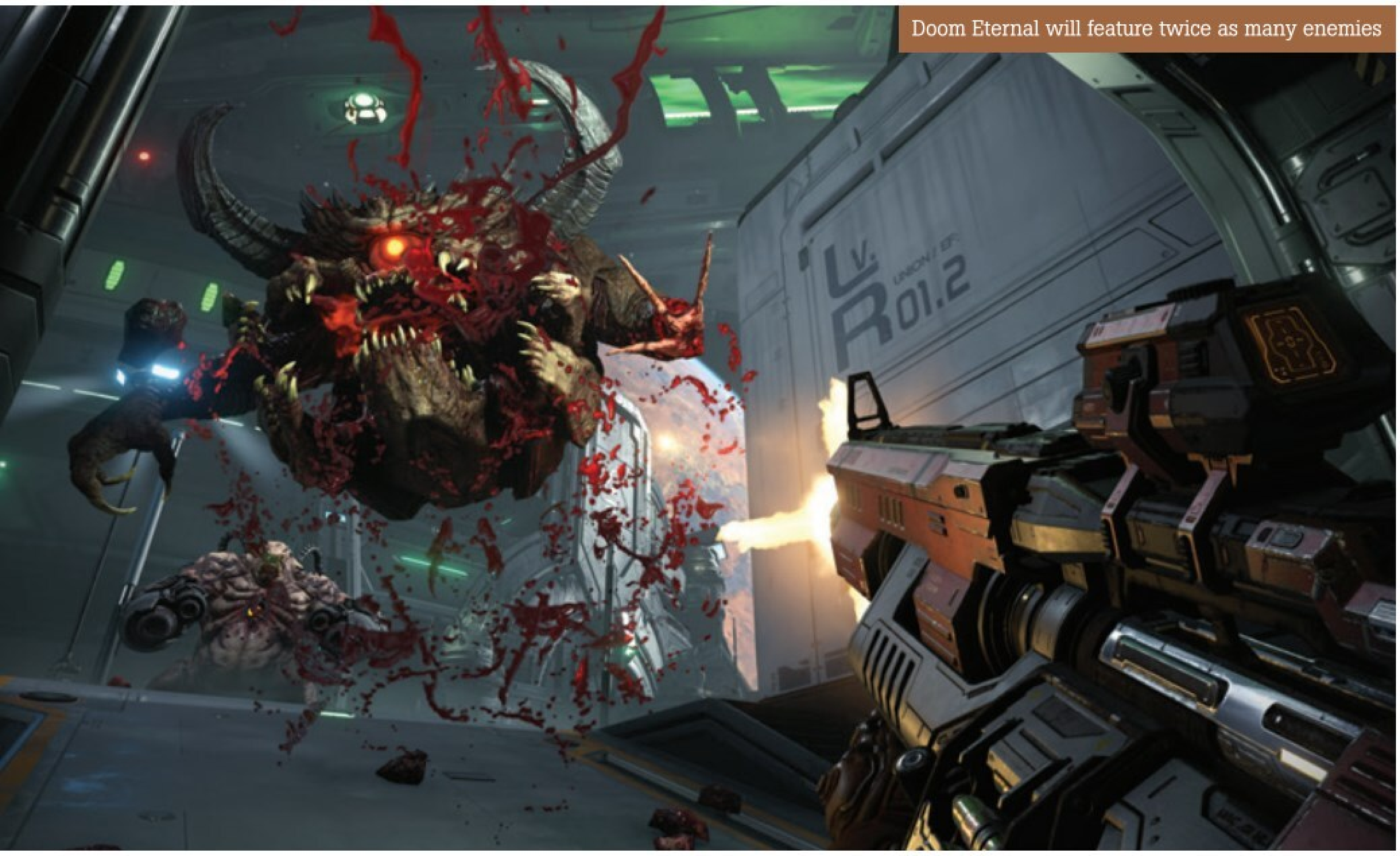
Doom Eternal doesn't have a release date yet, but is expected to hit next year. Bethesda has announced it will be coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, and in a surprise, Switch. Doom 2016 eventually came to Switch, but let's hope that its early listing means it launches on the same day as the other versions. » **Andrew Reiner**

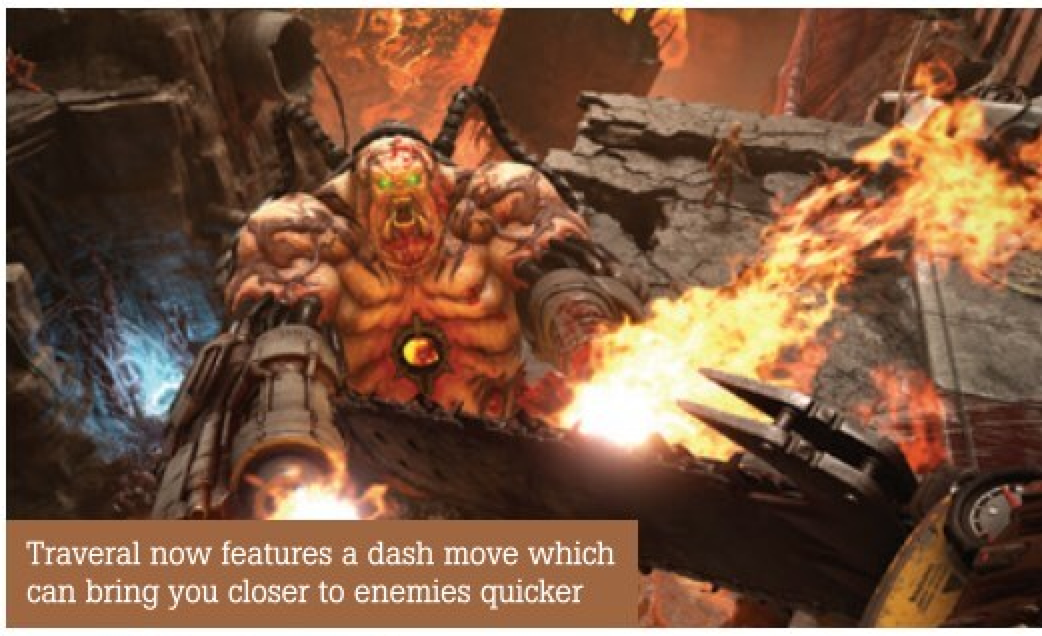
Multiplayer, Mods, And DLC

Id Software admits Doom 2016's multiplayer didn't hit the mark. To make sure this experience feels like the core game, id is now handling multiplayer in house, whereas Doom 2016's was developed by Certain Affinity. No multiplayer details have been shared yet, but id stresses it won't be a "sidecar experience."

The same is likely the case for mod support. Again, id won't say what it has planned, but we know SnapMap, the tool that allowed players to build levels quickly using a variety of pieces, will not return. Fans are hoping this means full mod support is coming back to the series.

If your focus is strictly on the single-player experience, id heard your cries for more from Doom 2016 and plan to release new story content after the game ships.


Doom Eternal will feature twice as many enemies


Traveral now features a dash move which can bring you closer to enemies quicker

The Occupation

Immersive sim journalism

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Humble Bundle

» Developer
White Paper Games

» Release
October 9

After a terrorist attack in the heart of England kills 23 people, the British parliament drafts The Union Act, a controversial law that threatens to erode the country's immigration policies and civil liberties. It's October 24th, 1987. You are an investigative journalist, and your actions over the course of a single day will set the course for the future of the country and the people who hope to live there.

The setting and history for The Occupation might be fictional, but it deals with some serious cultural themes relevant today. Indie developer White Paper Games previously worked on the narrative-driven first person game Ether One. With this latest project, the team has reconstructed the feel of North West England in the '80s and taken cues from system-driven titles like Dishonored and Deus Ex to create a tale where players must piece together disparate narratives and track down clues to uncover the truth behind a potential government conspiracy.

As intrepid reporters, players must interview important political figures, sneak into secret back rooms, and hunt for clues that could ultimately reveal the truth behind The Union Act. The game takes place across the span of four hours, and one minute in real life corresponds exactly to one minute of game time. Every NPC follows their own schedule, so as players learn these patterns they can exploit them and uncover more dirt on their interviewees.

"How active you are in the storyline determines the outcome," says White Paper Games co-founder and game designer Pete Bottomley. "You can just sit down and watch pigeons fly by or talk to random people. You don't have to actively participate in the story, but time is continuous. You don't have to hit certain triggers along the way to progress. The game will keep moving forward, which is kind of a cool concept when you are taking the journalistic approach."

Unlike inspirational games like Dishonored, The Occupation doesn't feature a combat system; if the player gets caught by security they are kicked out of the secured area, losing several minutes of precious investigation time. However, there are still several gameplay systems at work players can manipulate as they work to uncover this mystery. For example, in one scenario, players might want to break into a locked room and read confidential files, so they could hunt down and steal a passkey needed to unlock the door. Alternatively, they could peek over someone else's shoulder's as they punch in the code. Yet another option would be to shut down the power to the room, which kills the building's electronic locks. In the end, some players might skip this room altogether and gain similar information by interviewing people and collecting intel elsewhere.

"We wanted to create multiple ways that you could progress," Bottomley says. "If someone doesn't play the classic stealthy immersive sim game, we have the kind of modern narrative exploration aspect too. If you want to dig through all these papers and read all the notes and piece things together, you can do it that way. But if you're more of a stealthy, crawling through vents and trying to get into locked rooms type, there is that approach. Then if you're the kind of person that just wants to run through the level, creating chaos and having people chase after you, there's also that approach."

White Paper Games began development of The Occupation in the summer of 2015, hoping to tell a powerful story about political corruption and immigration reform. We're interested to see how the final games comes together in October, because those themes seem equally relevant in 2018. **» Ben Reeves**

Life Is Strange 2

Packing up and moving on

After the success of Life is Strange, developer Dontnod is sticking with the episodic, narrative-based format for its upcoming sequel. Beyond those core tenets, however, everything else about Life is Strange 2 feels different, though it's mostly for the better.

Life is Strange 2 follows Sean and Daniel Diaz, brothers who've run away from home after a mysterious event occurs in their hometown of Seattle. What about Chris, from the prequel episode The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit? He is part of the story eventually, but Dontnod wouldn't elaborate.

Three years after the events of the original game, the Diaz brothers' journey has them traveling to Mexico, which means players see quite a bit of the Pacific Coast.

The reason for the road trip has to do with their recently deceased father. Practicing his zombie routine for Halloween, Daniel bumps into an overly aggressive teenager named Brett, accidentally smearing fake blood on his shirt. This quickly leads to a fistfight between Sean and Brett, and it doesn't end well. Brett falls on a sharp rock, and as he writhes on the ground the brothers realize something has gone horribly wrong.

A police officer arrives on the scene, and nervously begins shouting at Sean and Daniel to lie on the ground. When the brothers' dad appears to de-escalate the situation, things continue to spiral out of control. A flurry of shouting, nervous voices and one gunshot later, and their father is dead.

The scene quickly cuts out and flashes forward. Something else has happened, and now the officer is lying on the ground as well. His squad vehicle is overturned, too, hinting that Sean might have some sort of supernatural ability similar to Max in the first Life is Strange. As more police arrive on the scene, Sean and a barely conscious Daniel skip town, fearing they'll be blamed for the chaos.

As the older brother, Sean is the duo's de facto leader and the character you inhabit, while the main catalyst for your decisions is Daniel, whose childhood you're shaping. As the two walk down a Pacific Northwest highway, Daniel spots a car with its window partially rolled down that has a Choco Crisp bar on the dashboard. While it doesn't have any immediate consequences, casually nabbing the candy from an unknown stranger may change what Daniel thinks of stealing things later on. Not every decision will have this large of an impact, but most of these interactions serve to build the bond between the two brothers.

These scenes are only a small part of Life is Strange 2, and many of the most important questions about the game can only be answered once we have our hands on the first episode come late September. How impactful will all these choices be? If Sean does indeed have some sort of power, will it tie in to gameplay at some point?

But even with all these unanswered questions, the writing expertly explores the bond between two brothers. The increased nuance with which the two scenes handled most characters shows Dontnod isn't just resting on the success of the first Life is Strange, but is actively looking to expand the series' reach and push boundaries. » **Suriel Vazquez**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Dontnod

» **Release**
September 27
(Episode 1)

Sable

A colorful, peaceful adventure

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Raw Fury

» Developer
Shedworks

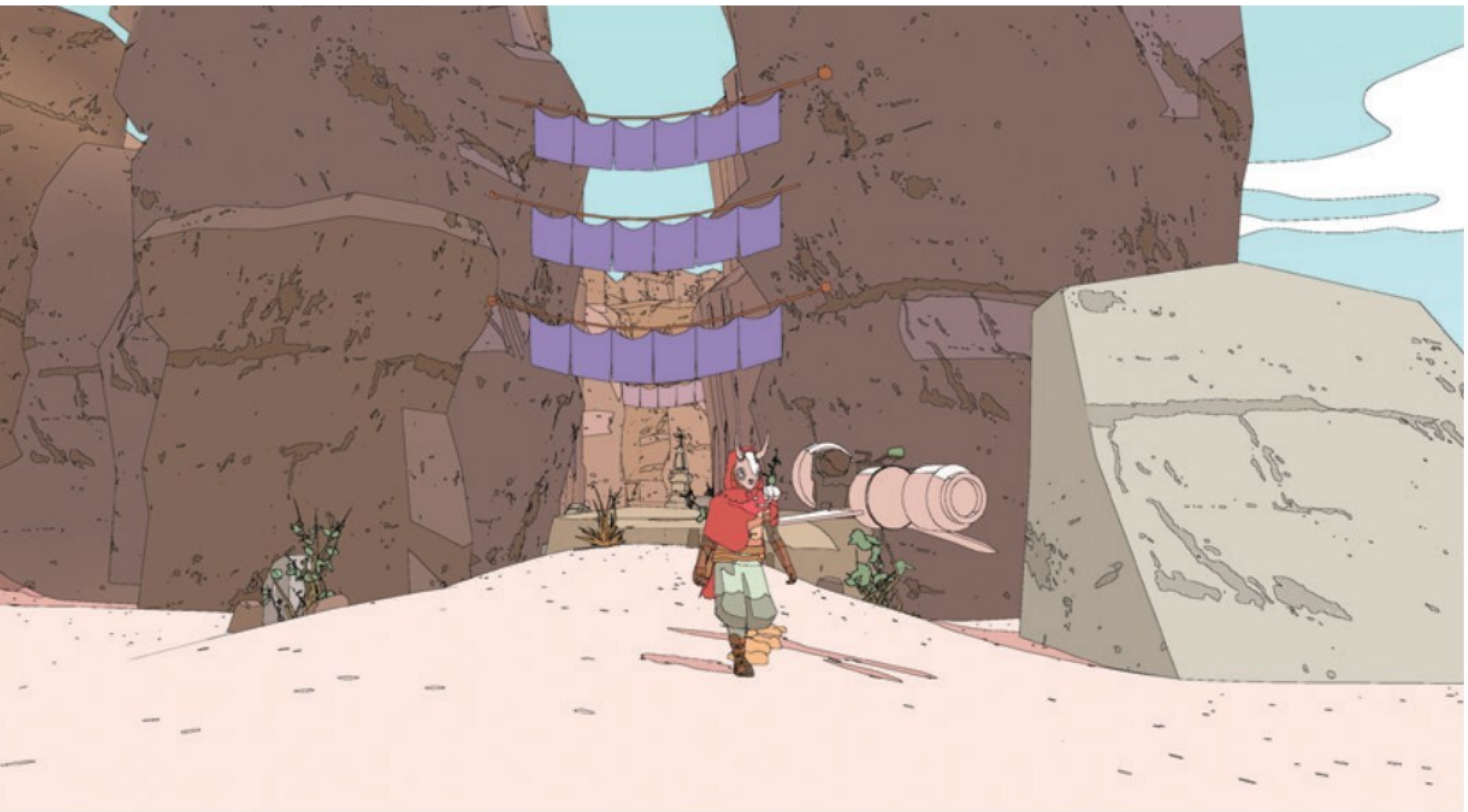
» Release
Late 2019

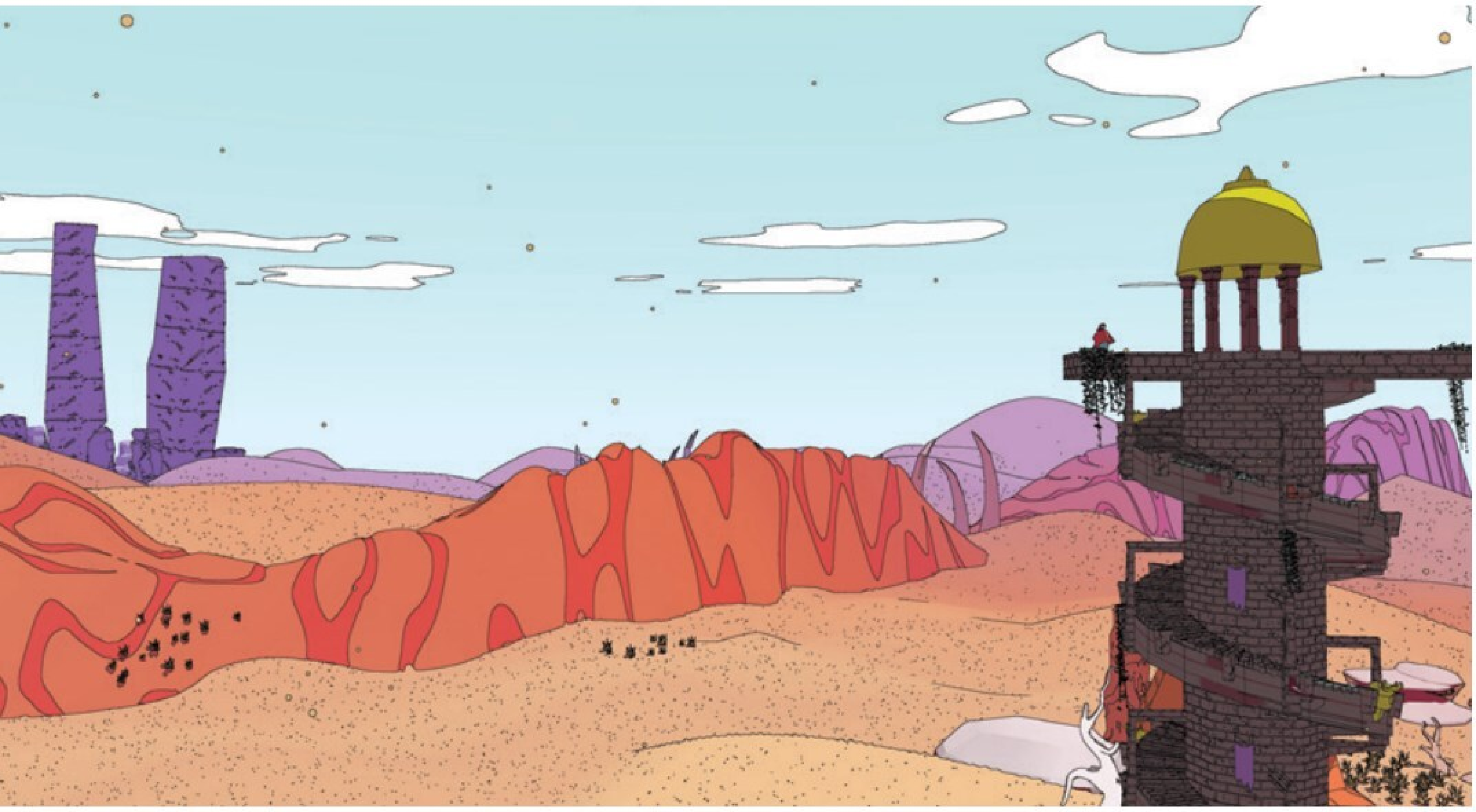
With vibrant, flat colors, thin-but-noticeable comic book outlines, and expansive environments, every screenshot of Sable looks like a piece of gorgeous concept art. Pulling off Sable's clean, distinct look is more about direction than tech, however, and Shedworks looked at some stellar places for inspiration.

The largest influence comes from French cartoonist Jean Giraud, who created visually striking comics like *The World of Edena* using a style called Ligne Claire, which emphasizes stark contrasts by having little to no shading between different colors. The other influence is Studio Ghibli's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*.

In motion, Sable has a stark visual contrast of its own; characters in the foreground move at a different framerate than the backgrounds, making it seem as though stop-motion figures are moving around in a high-fidelity world. It's an eye-catching look, and Sable has gained much attention as gorgeous GIFs of this style in action circulated on social media.

The art style even caught the eye of Michelle Zauner, the singer/songwriter behind the band Japanese Breakfast. "She saw the GIFs on the internet and was like, 'I want to be a part of this!'" says publisher Raw Fury co-founder David Martinez. Luckily, Zauner's work was present in my demo of the game; much of the ambient background music I heard was her work. Martinez says it's likely the soundtrack will be available for purchase separately.





Shedworks hopes to make its latest project more than another gorgeous-looking indie darling, however. Martinez calls Sable a "non-combative exploration game." It follows a young girl named Sable as she makes a coming-of-age pilgrimage across a series of sparse environments, and emphasizes a sense of open-ended discovery that doesn't hold your hand. "You can think of it like Breath of the Wild, which has you go into temples and doing puzzles and stuff to get some kind of reward," Martinez says.

Sable can cling to just about any surface she comes into contact with for a limited time simply by approaching it and moving forward. Once at high ground, you can leap off and summon a translucent bubble to hover over long gaps. These powers make navigation a breeze and are at your disposal from the start of your journey. "The game isn't about powering up and fighting big monsters, it's about the world and the characters and the feeling of freedom you get when travelling on your own," says developer Daniel Fineberg. "We don't want to put any restrictions on the world."

It also helps to have a hoverbike for longer journeys. As soon as I got on one, Martinez was quick to point out the controls are not yet final and the team is still tinkering with them, and it showed; controlling the bike felt unwieldy. They took quite a bit of getting used to, but Martinez said it is possible to get the hang of them in their current state.

We eventually find ourselves inside a small temple, which again makes me think of the Zelda comparison. The shrine I encounter is less dungeon and more shrine, however, as it mostly involves one elongated puzzle in which you need to find and reach the switch needed to get a shining, golden sarcophagus-like object through a series of gates. It's nothing too intricate, and Martinez tells me it's on par with what they have in the rest of the game in terms of difficulty. While the art style is mostly finalized, the team is still working out these kinds of puzzles and where they might all eventually lead. Throughout my entire stay at the temple, I did not encounter a single enemy.

My time with Sable was short but memorable. Simply exploring its world is a joy thanks to a look that is sure to turn heads, and the open-ended exploration should make for a fun, meditative experience when Sable hits sometime next year. » **Suriel Vazquez**

Cyberpunk 2077

Letting you have it both ways

Cyberpunk 2077's extensive demo at E3 earned plenty of accolades (including *Game Informer*'s own Game of the Show award) for its nuanced aesthetic and dense world-building. During that presentation, developer CD Projekt Red touted the way V (your merc player character), could make all kinds of meaningful choices, but the single playthrough we witnessed at E3 couldn't relay those divergent paths. During a presentation at Gamescom, we saw another playthrough, giving us a glimpse into how V's decisions can impact their story.

This showing initially followed a familiar path. After the successful rescue of a well-off missing person from scavengers who planned to harvest her cybernetic implants, V's partner, Jackie, sends word about another big-time job. They must recover a high-grade military drone from a violent group known as Maelstrom for a shady kingpin named Dexter DeShawn. As in the first demo, V first meets up with Meredith Stout, a high-ranking agent at Militech, creators of the drone. Although V plans to bargain with Stout, she's quickly overwhelmed at the meetup. Meredith isn't interested in any hardware; instead, she wants info on a mole she's embedded within the Maelstrom gang, and is willing to give you a chip with 50,000 credits on it to buy the tech for DeShawn in order to get the info.

Things take a different turn when V meets up with Maelstrom. Although Stout says the chip has a virus in it she can use to scout Malestrom's network and get info on the mole, V decides to be upfront, telling Maelstrom the chip is rigged to kill whoever tries to cash in the credits. Maelstrom's leader, Royce, isn't exactly grateful, but lets V take the tech without incident. Maelstrom still uploads the chip into their server just to make sure the story checks out, but luckily, no one is harmed and the Maelstrom network remains uncompromised.

Though V and Jackie have the chance to walk away from the deal unscathed, Jackie has another idea: clear the room with a grenade and take the now virus-free chip for ourselves. V gives him the go-ahead, and the plan works beautifully.

V and Jackie still have to purge the area of Maelstrom goons, however. During their violent escape we see a new weapon in action: a katana equipped with an electromagnetic shield. Charging into one particularly reckless Maelstromer who decides he has no need for cover, V deflects his rounds with the shield before entering slow motion, which is enabled by a heightened combat sense implant. She then delivers a devastating horizontal slash to his lower half. We hear him yell, "Jesus Christ, my legs!" at half-speed.

With no one left alive to spill info on the mole, Militech isn't too pleased with V, since it means searching the plant to see if any corpses might still possess some info. But it's good enough for a hard day's work, one that lets V deliver the drone to DeShawn and walk out 50,000 credits richer.

This second run reveals a number of different ways this one quest in Cyberpunk 2077 can unfold; V didn't have to blow the room after getting the drone. Would Maelstrom have become a valuable ally if V hadn't? It's hard to know for now, but the idea doesn't sound too farfetched after seeing just a couple of the many branching paths in CD Projekt Red's ambitious RPG.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
CD Projekt Red

» Developer
CD Projekt Red

» Release
2019

WWE 2K19

Creating a showcase for Daniel Bryan

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Yuke's, Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 9

A few years ago, WWE 2K introduced a mode called Showcase that let fans relive classic wrestling rivalries from the league's storied history, complete with documentary-style video packages that used actual wrestling footage and commentary. Unfortunately, Showcase mode was absent from the WWE titles for the last few years. This fan-favorite mode returns for WWE 2K19, and this time around the experience focuses exclusively on the life and career of WWE all-star Daniel Bryan.

"2K Showcase has always been a favorite of the fans – as well as a personal favorite of a lot of people on the team," says Visual Concepts narrative designer Sean Conaway. "We felt that bringing it back was necessary, but only if we had the right story to tell. Daniel Bryan fit that mold perfectly. Not only is he beloved by the WWE Universe, he's the ultimate underdog who never stops fighting, which is both extremely relatable and inspirational. We were honored to retell his story – working so hard to reach his goal, only to have it taken away for reasons both personal and professional."

Throughout Showcase mode, players follow Daniel Bryan on his long and storied career as they relive key matches and complete historically accurate objectives like winning the world heavyweight championship belt in WrestleMania 30 or developing his signature move, The Yes Lock. Between matches, Bryan discusses his early days in the ring, his premature retirement due to a brain lesion, and his recent return to the action at WrestleMania 34.

WWE 2K19 also introduces a new mode called Towers. In this game type, players compete as an established WWE Superstar or their own created character and work up a series of towers composed of increasingly-challenging wrestling matches. Each Tower has a unique theme and features various win conditions, such as starting a match with a finisher or entering an event with almost no health.

"The Towers themes are really exciting because they allow us to tell a little bit of an interactive story," says Visual Concepts designer Dino Zucconi. "Take the 'Champions of NXT,' for example. In this Tower, you compete against a roster of opponents who are NXT alumni."

WWE games have struggled to find their footing in recent years, and we're still worried 2K19's in-ring action won't be strong enough to draw in anyone other than hardcore wrestling fanatics. Recapping Daniel Bryan's career in the return of Showcase and the rotating challenges of Towers mode are smart additions, so hopefully Yuke's and Visual Concepts are taking this series in the right direction.
» **Ben Reeves**

The Dark Pictures: Man Of Medan

The start of something horrifying

After creating the critical darling Until Dawn, developer Supermassive Games tried to recapture that spark with games like The Inpatient and Hidden Agenda, which didn't reach the same critical mass. With its next project, The Dark Pictures: Man of Medan, the developer delves back into the horror genre. This time, it's taking inspiration from another horror staple: the anthology.

The first of what Supermassive hopes is several releases in The Dark Pictures anthology, Man of Medan takes Until Dawn's horror-adventure premise into the open sea, wherein a group of spry 20-somethings searching for the legendary *SS Ourang Medan* ghost ship are taken captive and forced to explore the abandoned WWII freighter. Before I begin my demo, however, I get the choice to play rationally or emotionally. Playing rationally means being able to take your time making decisions about which path to take, whether to be nice or aggressive with someone, etc. Playing emotionally means all your decisions are on a short timer, which encourages thinking on your feet and going with your gut.

The demo begins with a series of "previously on…" quick flashes summarizing the story up to this point, though it's likely we'll see the full version of these scenes play out in the final game. The scene begins as Fliss and Brad, two of the teens, are being held at gunpoint by a man named Danny. Playing as Fliss, I explore the freighter and uncover a few hidden items, such as the cap of one of the long-dead crewmembers. Bandai Namco wouldn't outright say what finding these secrets means, but being thorough will likely affect the outcome of the story.

Branching adventure games are an increasingly crowded genre, but even in this short demo, Supermassive's talent with the format is on display.

The solid voice acting and outstanding facial animation performances sell the stakes of the story. Even the attention to cinematography is top-notch; one shot, framed by the blurry outline of a dead seaman's corpse, alludes to a coming scare as Fliss explores the area, following through on that promise when the camera refocuses on the corpse as it jerks its head to face her when she leaves the room.

Man of Medan also falls back on the genre-standard quick-time events. As Fliss stumbles into a sunken pool filled with corpses hoping to drag her down with them, I have to press or mash the face buttons to push them away, though missing one prompt doesn't mean certain doom. Supermassive says plenty of opportunities present themselves for some (or all) of your characters to die. With each tale in The Dark Pictures anthology lasting about four to five hours, Supermassive says each one features more decisions and branching paths than any of its previous projects.

After being underwhelmed by some of Supermassive's recent output, I'm excited to see more of Man of Medan and the future of The Dark Pictures. Focusing on a set of smaller, standalone stories instead of trying to inflate a single one sounds like a great direction for Supermassive. Hopefully, Man of Medan signals the return to form fans have been waiting for.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco Entertainment

» **Developer**
Supermassive Games

» **Release**
2019

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

Armed for victory

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
From Software

» Release
March 22

From Software has made its name on building challenging jaunts through grim worlds, and now the studio is gearing up for something a little more colorful, if just as deadly. Sekiro, a stealth-action game concerned with a shinobi's quest for revenge, introduces mechanics and systems we haven't seen before in Souls. However, after getting hands-on time with Sekiro, we're convinced From Software fans should find a lot of of love in this adventure.

With Sekiro, From Software was heavily inspired by the late 16th century Sengoku period of Japanese history. The environments are filled with pagodas and grass-camouflaged samurai. However, this world is also filled with every kind of nightmare from Japanese myth, and I was overcome repeatedly by headless warriors, giant snakes, and chain-clad giants.

This lone shinobi's arm has been stolen. In its place are any number of unique prosthetics, which are more useful than an arm in battle. One is called the loaded ax, which functions as a heavy attack that breaks through shields. Another prosthetic fires off a steady stream of shuriken. When I followed this attack up with a traditional katana slash, the shinobi dashed toward his target, so this combo is a great way to close big gaps between opponents.

One of my favorite tools is a fire rod that produces a shotgun blast of flame. When I performed a katana combo with this prosthetic, it set my sword ablaze, which increased my damage output for a short while. From Software says the final game features an even wider variety of prosthetic weapons that players can unlock and swap between as they progress.

As expected, most enemies have a health bar, but they also have a "posture" bar that slowly fills as you attack or parry. This posture bar represents their defense, and when it fills, you can perform a powerful attack that kills a lot of smaller foes and chips off a block of health from bosses. You also have a posture bar, and when that fills, you are incredibly vulnerable.

I died several times after losing my posture, but as the title says, shadows die twice. When you die, you can choose to resurrect yourself and get the drop on enemies who don't expect a dead man to jump on their backs. You only have a limited number of resurrections, but can earn more as you kill enemies.

One of the biggest changes from the Souls series is a stealth mechanic, and this is a welcome addition. Sekiro is still primarily an action game where players must commit to deliberate and well-timed attacks, but going stealth allows you to thin the herd before engaging bigger enemies that are harder to sneak up on. From Software says players might not want to leave too many foes untouched because killing enemies ties into the progression system, which the studio will detail at a later date.

Sekiro's feudal Japanese setting, mix of prosthetic weapons, and stealthy action set it apart. Some Dark Souls fans might worry Sekiro strays too far from their beloved formula, but every second of my demo felt as tense and engrossing as From Software's recent work. » **Ben Reeves**

Generation Zero

Robots rise up in Avalanche's '80s-infused shooter

Avalanche Studios' output appears to be snowballing. In addition to creating Rage 2 and Just Cause 4, the Swedish developer is working on a self-published game called Generation Zero. The game was announced at E3, and we were impressed with its first showing – as weird as its premise may seem. It features a mysterious robot uprising and post-apocalyptic environments largely barren of humanity. As a kicker, it just so happens to be set in an alternate version of Sweden in the '80s. At Gamescom, the studio let us get our hands on Generation Zero to see how we fared against the mechanical threats.

The mission was simple: Head to a bomb shelter in a nearby village, and hopefully find some fellow survivors. My co-op partner and I methodically blasted our way through a variety of different robots, from small, pouncing ticks to a hulking creation called the tank. The shooting was satisfying but standard, though the weird atmosphere helped elevate it overall. Encounters are spaced out, and tension creeps up with every step. Where did everyone go, anyway? Avalanche is giving players a chance to learn as much, or as little, as they like through open-world exploration filled with optional missions.

Along the way, players can outfit their character in true '80s style. My hero sported a backward cap and a thick, gold dookie chain, but that's just the start. You can find more cosmetics as you explore – loud patterns and tragic haircuts are apparently plentiful. Best of all, Avalanche says there won't be microtransactions, so you have to earn the right to look so gleefully corny.
» **Jeff Cork**

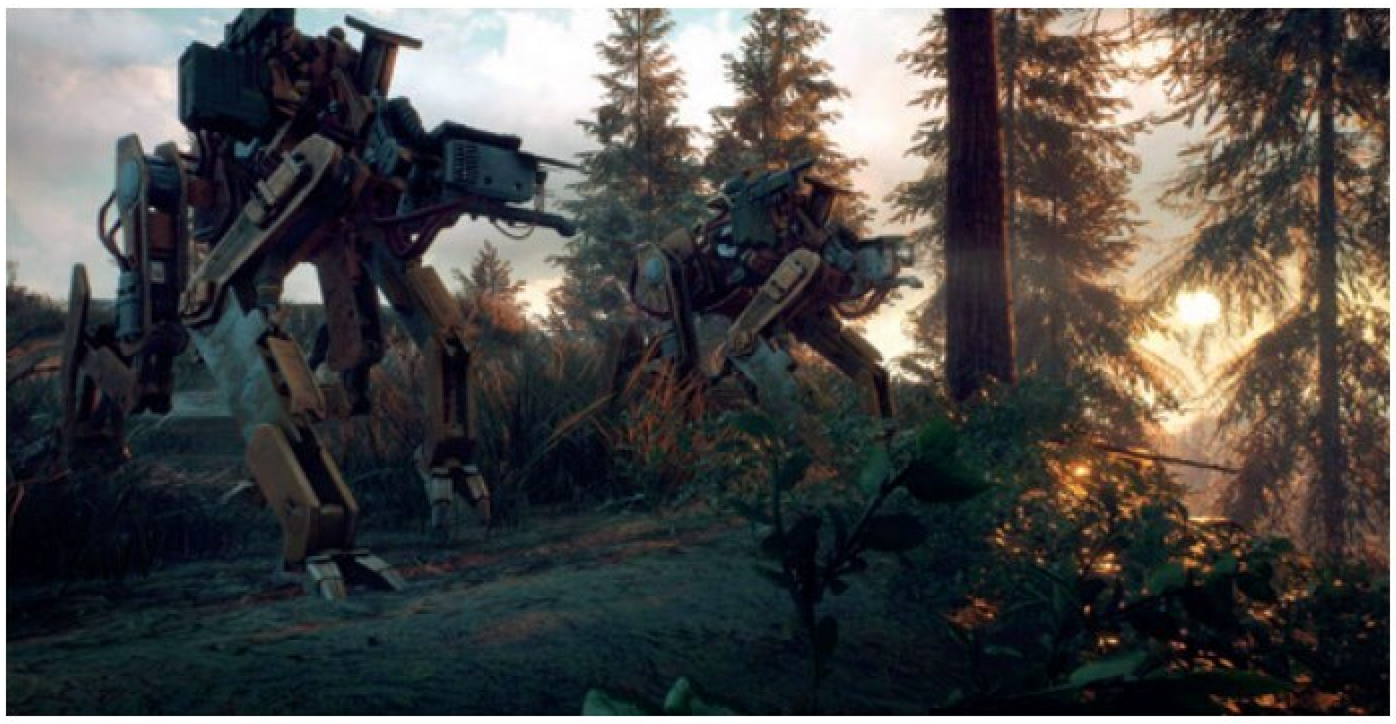
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

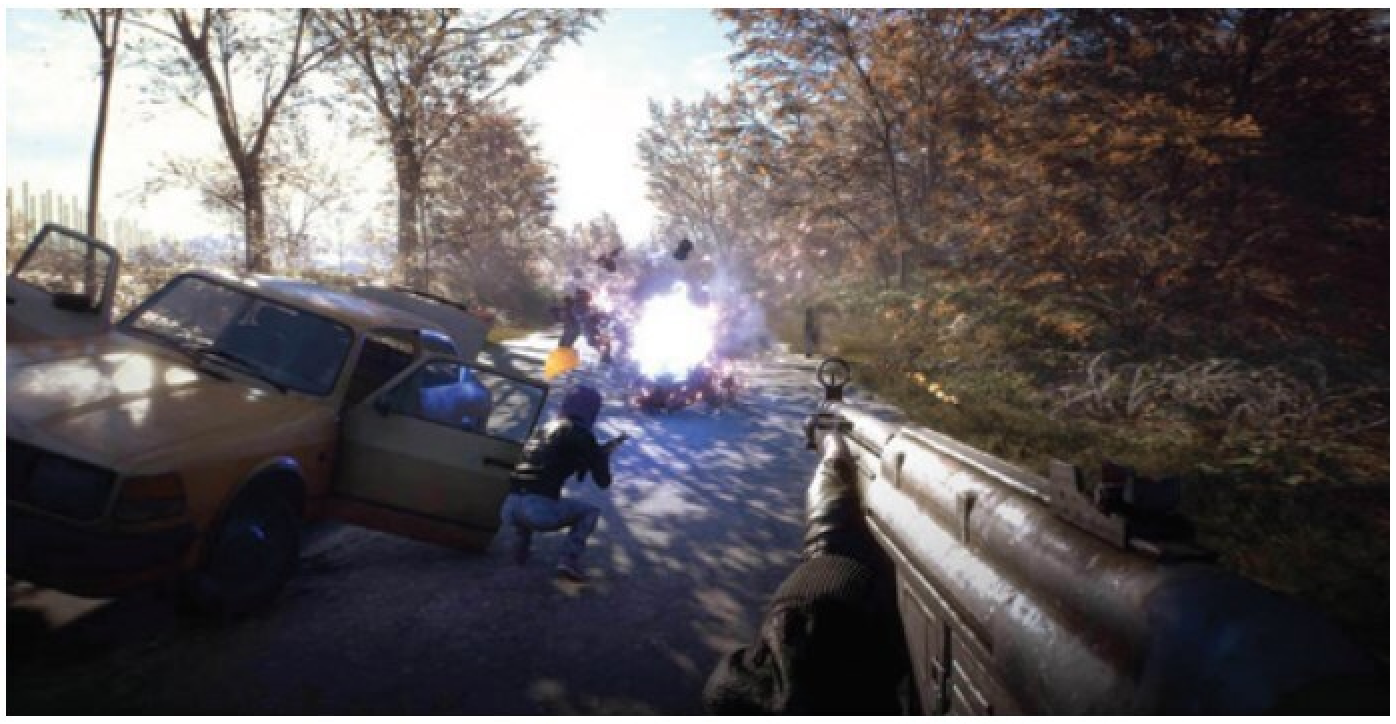
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)

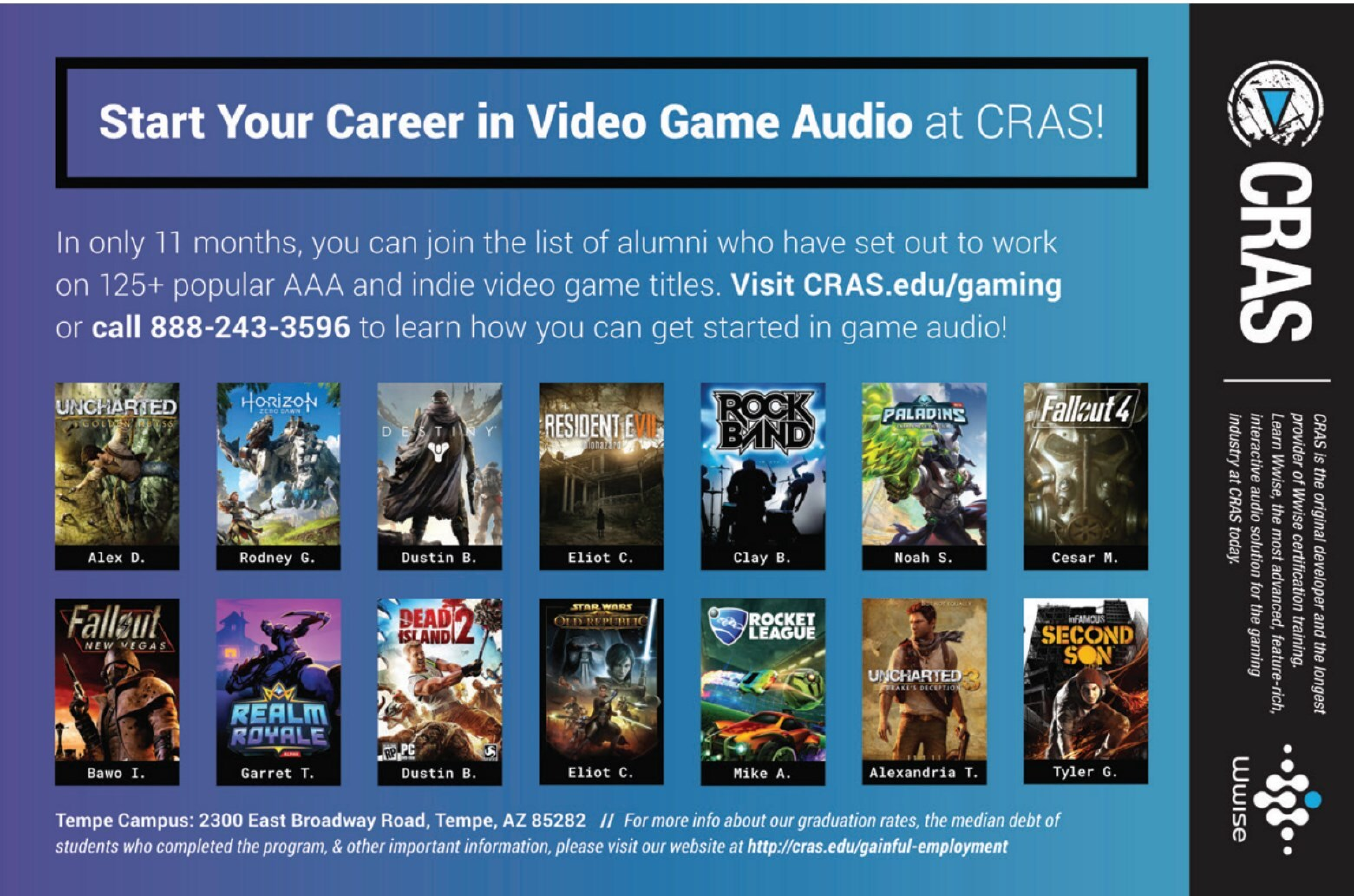
» **Publisher**
Avalanche Studios

» **Developer**
Avalanche Studios

» **Release**
2019







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Realm Royale

A fantasy take on the burgeoning genre

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
100-Player
Online Action

» Publisher
Hi-Rez Studios

» Developer
Hi-Rez Studios

» Release
TBA

The battle royale genre is poised to be inundated with all kinds of hungry competitors looking for a slice of the Fortnite and PUBG pie, and Hi-Rez studios has a promising entrant into the grand affair. Eschewing the often modern or futuristic trappings of current offerings, the Early Access title Realm Royale uses a fractured fantasy motif where guns still exist, but so do castles, horses, archetypal classes, and of course, clucking chickens wandering aimlessly as a downing mechanic.

Many of the core concepts of Realm Royale remain familiar – drop down onto a map alone or with a team and attempt to be the last one(s) standing after a brutal battle. The zone of play shrinks, weapons and armor can be found in chests scattered across the map, and gilded boxes touting legendary gear fall from the sky. However, Realm Royale does enough differently from the rest of the pack to generate interest.

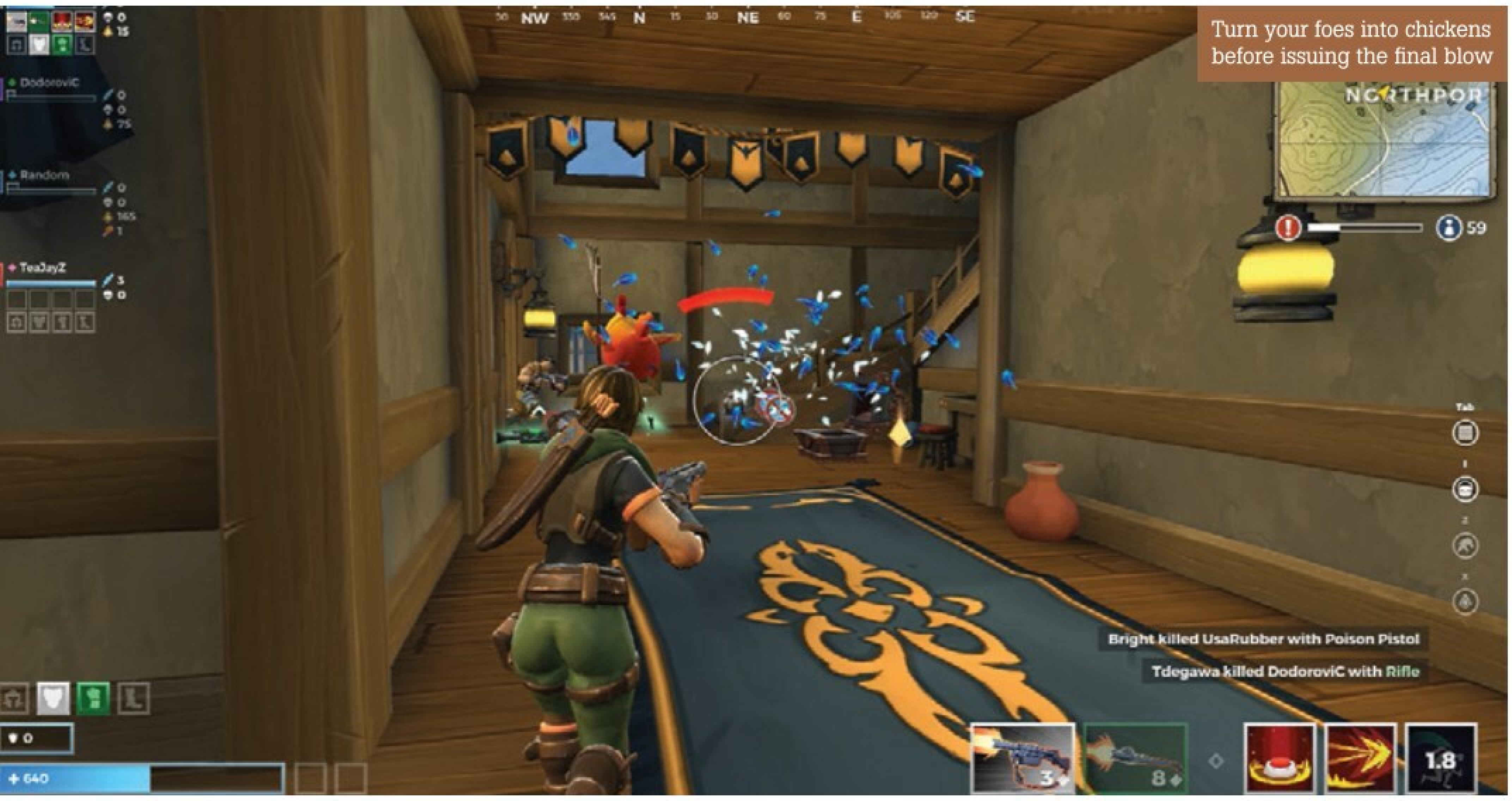
Players pick a class at the beginning of a match from a list of traditional roles like hunter, rogue, warrior, engineer, or mage. These templates come with abilities that can be found and collected during play that offer new options outside of traditional weaponry like smoke bombs, deployable turrets, tossed healing potions, fireballs, and more. These add an additional layer of consideration to every encounter.

Realm Royale incentivizes combat in a number of ways. Forges dot the map and create focal points of contention. Players can craft extremely powerful weapons and armor here (including class-specific legendaries like the hunter bow or engineer grenade launcher), but they need to spend resources and stick around for some time while the gear is crafted. Other players can see the smoke rise from the forge and attempt to come by to take out the players – and steal the gear when the forge pops them out. Players also require little chicken idols to craft the best items, and these can only be obtained by killing other competitors.

Instead of players going down and needing to be resuscitated in team-play, they go into "chicken" form when killed. These little awkward, noisy characters are easy to kill and have no defenses, but if you can outmaneuver those hunting you for a few seconds, you respawn. Escaping certain death by hopping out a window or doing circles around a crate and coming back into the fray is a fun take on the death mechanic.

The combatants in the battle royale genre are many, and Realm Royale has already been struggling to maintain its early access player base. Nonetheless, Hi-Rez's fantastical take is different enough to stand out, and its planned release on consoles (including Switch) means more players will have a chance to give it a shot. We're excited to see it develop on the road to release.

» **Daniel Tack**



Bright killed UsaRubber with Poison Pistol
Tdegawa killed DodorovIC with Rifle

Turn your foes into chickens before issuing the final blow

Breach

Resurrecting a promising idea from the past

Once upon a time at BioWare Austin, the studio was building an episodic action/role-playing game called Shadow Realms. Wizards clad in office-garb and gun-toting clerics faced off against the dungeon master-like Shadow Lords in asymmetric 4v1 gameplay. While Shadow Realms never saw the light of day, two heavy hitters on the project, Dallas Dickinson and Gabe Amatangelo, have created a spiritual successor of sorts at their new company, QC Games.

In Breach, the wall between reality and the world of myth is tearing down. Satyrs, minotaurs, oni, Baba Yaga, Anubis, and plenty of other crazy mythological monsters are on deck to do battle in a variety of locations such as Tokyo, Kiev, and Egypt. These trapped creatures were imprisoned to protect humanity forever, but the one who sent them to the great beyond has had a change of heart, and mankind must struggle to survive in the face of beings that were considered bedtime stories and legends.

From a base of operations in the Library of Alexandria (which was never destroyed in this alternate reality), players create and customize classes and loadouts where classic meets modern, with gun mages or dressed-up sword swingers. In addition to basic attacks and dodges, each character has many abilities to master, including an ultimate skill that charges up during a dungeon run and can be unleashed for powerful, potentially game-changing results. Some abilities for classic archetypes like snipers and front-line tankers are immediately easy to understand, but more advanced fare, like mastering a chronomancer's abilities to extend buffs on your allies and slow down opponents in the same field of altered time, offer a high skill cap. Ultimate abilities are often flashy – the aforementioned chronomancer can stop time itself, allowing allies to reposition and punish enemies accordingly.

On the flip side of things there's the Veil Demon. If you choose the PvP option, a human controls this creature, which is highly customizable in terms of specialties and builds. Veil Demons pick elite units that can be called in from a deep roster, create punishing artifacts, walls, and traps, and can possess and control monsters directly. Playing as a Veil Demon is a frenzied affair, attempting to manage your ability cooldowns for maximum effect all while zipping from monster to monster, using each of their attacks and abilities to disrupt and eventually kill the do-gooders. Playing the evil overseer is a markedly different experience than the adventurers, and possessing elite units and bosses feels great as you attempt to ruin the opposing team's day.

Players can get their first taste of Breach this September via Steam Early Access, with the possibility of a console release in the future. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
5-Player Online Action/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
QC Games

» **Developer**
QC Games

» **Release**
September

NEW MODEL SMARTPHONE
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Resident Evil 2

Once again, enter the survival horror

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Capcom

» Release
January 25

Leon and Claire have their own campaigns in the Resident Evil 2 remake. While there is some overlap between the two journeys, they are largely different and feature unique characters and environments.

We played as Leon at E3, but a new hands-on session at Gamescom let us see Claire in action. A few hours into the game, Claire enters a maintenance area where she encounters a young girl named Sherry. Those who played the original Resident Evil 2 might remember that Sherry is the daughter of William and Annette Birkin, two scientists whose work on the G-virus ultimately spawned the zombie outbreak. When Claire encounters Sherry, she is hiding behind a pile of debris. Claire offers to protect her. Unfortunately, someone else is also interested in Sherry: a mutated beast named William Birkin.

Sherry's father performed some gnarly experiments that turned him into a gruesome freak whose skin can withstand more than a couple hits from a napalm-spewing grenade launcher. Fortunately, Claire is packing a miniature arsenal, so I get to work using that surplus ammo.

A few of the pipes inside the maintenance room burst under the onslaught, and the room slowly fills with smoke. Given the tight corridors, I occasionally run to a corner and reload, so I rarely know where Birkin will jump out from. Resident Evil 2's action feels good. The controls are precise and smooth, and the aiming reticle zeroes in on your target the longer you take to line up your shot. However, I rarely had that level of patience during this tense firefight. After burning through most of my health and ammo, I finally take down Birkin and pull Sherry to safely.

Our previous demo of Leon's campaign featured a lot of exploration and puzzles, so this sequence fighting a mutated Birkin was a nice change of pace. I look forward to seeing what else is in store for both Leon and Claire when the Resident Evil 2 remake hits early next year. » **Ben Reeves**

Hitman 2

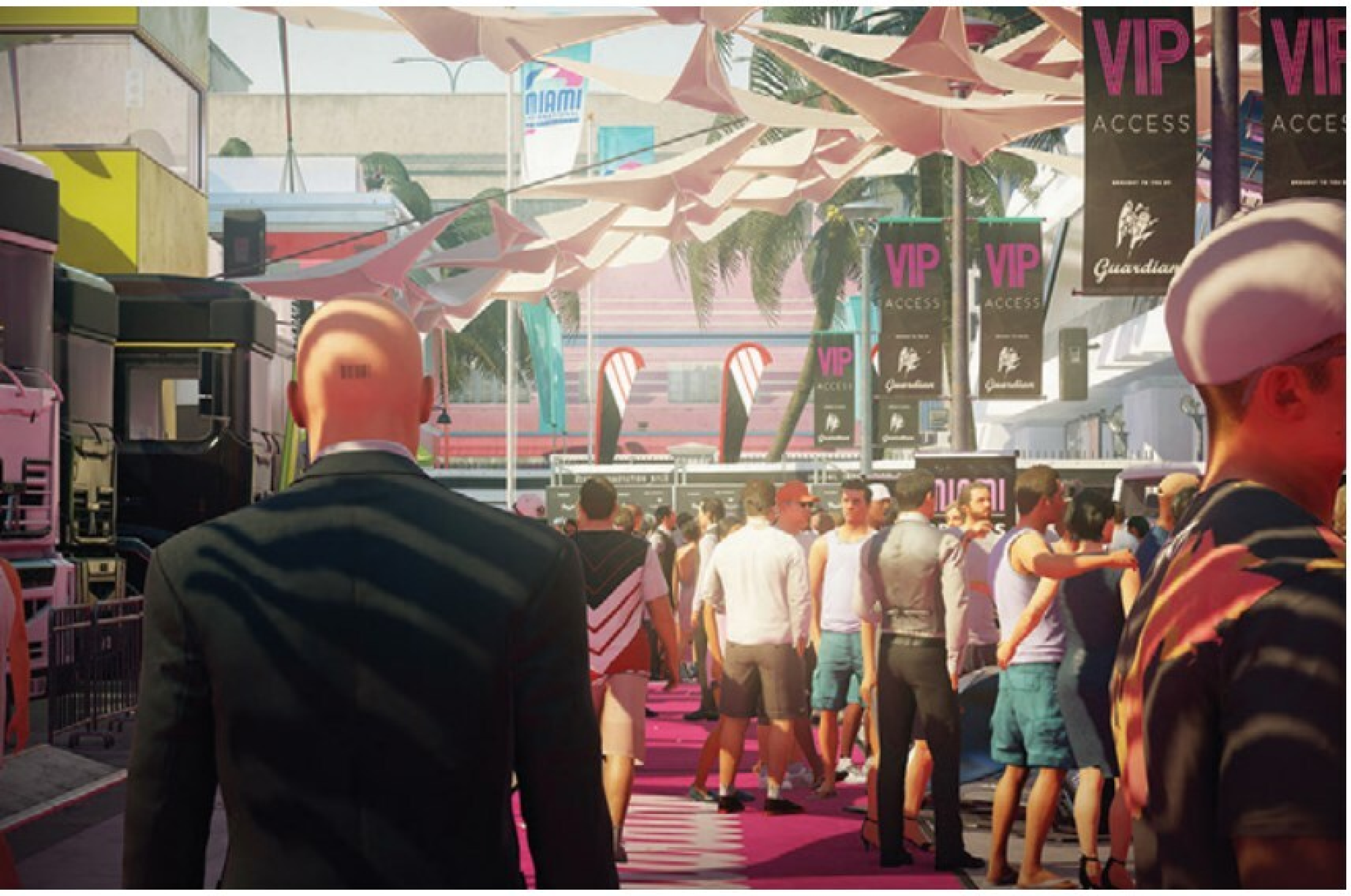
Welcome to Miami, try to avoid the heat

Agent 47 isn't known for getting himself into absurd situations, but that doesn't mean he's above wearing a pink flamingo costume in order to get close to his target. During Gamescom, I played the complete version of Hitman 2's new Miami level, which features that particular assassination moment, as well as an all-new one.

Our intrepid assassin is in Florida on a family-oriented mission. This one's more heart stopping than heartwarming, unfortunately. He's tasked with taking out a father and daughter both implicated in war crimes. The daughter is easy enough, after donning the aforementioned disguise during race day festivities, I lure the racecar driver to a quiet spot and push her into a trash hole. Her father requires a little more subtlety.

After shedding the pink costume, I dress up as a security guard and infiltrate Robert Knox's inner sanctum. The techie has a fondness for fast cars, which ultimately proves to be his downfall. After I pose as an engineer, I sabotage a concept car's rear engine into exploding. That's what you get by crossing Agent 47's employer.

Hitman 2 feels much like its predecessor, though subtle enhancements like being able to blend into crowds and having more feedback when being spotted by security cameras make it more intuitive than ever to stay unnoticed. Even when you're dressed like a hot-pink bird. Best of all, these gameplay tweaks are also being retroactively applied to all the season one missions at no cost to owners of the previous game, which you can access directly from Hitman 2's new World of Assassination hub. » **Jeff Cork**



» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
IO Interactive

» **Release**
November 13

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Devil May Cry 5

Nero gets a few helping hands

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Capcom

» Release
March 8

Since announcing Devil May Cry 5, Capcom has not shared many details about the stylish action title. Devil May Cry 4 is a decade old, and meanwhile competitors like Bayonetta and God of War have made impressive strides in the genre. After getting some hands-on time with the game, it looks like Capcom is playing it safe, sticking to what's worked in the past. Some of the changes Devil May Cry 5 makes to the formula, however, could be major.

Combat is mostly classic DMC: You have buttons tied to your sword, gun, jumping, and arm. In my demo, Nero's gun didn't outpace his Red Queen sword in terms of damage, but it packed enough punch that I didn't feel like I was tickling enemies. You can also once again delay your button presses to produce different attacks. By the time my demo was over, I was getting in some solid combos by thinking about how I approached combat. As your combos get cooler and climb the letter grades, you begin to hear additional layers in the music, which gives you another incentive to get creative with your combos.

Even as I was relearning the controls, I could feel old instincts kick in; using a dashing strike to close the distance to enemies is valuable, and while it lacks some of the high-flying finesse and versatility of Bayonetta, the interplay between gun and sword attacks feels great.

Nero now makes use of different kinds of Devil Breakers, a line of robotic arms with different abilities that attach to his amputated arm. You can find these arms scattered throughout the levels, and they each have a limited number of uses. The Overture, for example, fires of an electric wave that deals damage, while the Gerbera allows for more aerial maneuverability, which makes for some balletic airborne combos. You can also charge up these attacks to deal more damage, or discharge by pressing that left bumper to produce a pulse that forces enemies off of you, though doing either will break your current arm completely.

The demo did not give a complete view of DMC 5's difficulty; aside from the boss fight at the end, I never felt I was in that much danger. With this only being a short snippet, I can't speak to how much managing your health between encounters matters.

My demo ended with a tough boss that had me using every tool at my disposal to control my distance and evade attacks, which is exactly what I want from Devil May Cry. After defeating the boss with a sliver of health remaining, I truly felt like I was back in Nero's shoes for the first time in a decade.

Devil May Cry 5 doubles down on the mainline series' strengths while sprucing up the edges, but that doesn't strike me as a negative. I'm not quite sold on the ammo system for Devil Breakers, but I'm not ready to dismiss it yet; it could lead to some challenging scenarios where players have to think on their feet about which arms to use when.

Plenty of action games have filled in the gap between mainline Devil May Cry entries, but what I played of DMC 5 not only reminded me of the series' unique brand of fast-paced combat, but has left me eager to see what changes are in store for Dante, as well as what surprises await regarding the mysterious third playable character.
» **Suriel Vazquez**

Stormdivers

The arcade masters tackle battle royale

After making a name for itself with 2D, arcade-style games like Super Stardust and Resogun, developer Housemarque announced last year it was moving away from these kinds of games due to poor sales and exploring more modern genres. Housemarque is jumping from an abandoned genre into an intensely crowded one: the battle royale shooter.

The team has ideas about how to differentiate itself from the competition. For starters, Stormdivers doubles down on power-ups. As players scavenge the battlefield for parts, they come across armor for one of four slots, and these pieces offer more than just extra defense; a set of goggles might let you see or hear enemy footsteps more easily, while a mask might sap life from enemies you shoot.

Additionally, inclement weather is a regular, random phenomenon, and impacts gameplay; one player managed to get inside a small tornado during a match, which dealt some damage but lifted them into the air, allowing them to get a quick bird's-eye view of the battlefield.

Stormdivers will debut as a standard battle royale game when it releases during its beta and potential Early Access, but Housemarque hopes to shape it into something different over the course of its development. "The roadmap will involve lots of PvE – bosses within the battle royale mode, minibosses as objectives," says Housemarque head of publishing Mikael Haveri.

One thing the team is adamant about is its stance against loot boxes. Housemarque wants to reward skilled players by giving them up to three random objectives each match, such as getting a triple kill or being one of the final few players left. Accomplishing these objectives offers a chance at an in-game stat boost, a rare power-up for the match, or a cosmetic item they can keep across matches. Players will know what these items are ahead of time, and can also use blueprints to craft specific items they want.

These twists on the battle royale genre are among the most radical we've seen, and, depending on which ideas stick the landing, it may just be enough for Stormdivers to lead Housemarque to a brighter future. » **Suriel Vazquez**

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter (Online TBA)

» Publisher
Housemarque

» Developer
Housemarque

» Release
2019

Soulcalibur VI

Telling many tales

Although Bandai Namco has been revealing Soulcalibur VI's roster at a steady clip (including the recently announced Tira, the first of four characters included in the season pass), we hadn't heard about what kinds of features are in store for the sword-fighting sequel. The company recently announced its single-player plans, which look more expansive in scope than we expected.

The first single-player story mode, Chronicle of Souls, relives moments from the first two Soulcalibur games, as well as Soul Edge. These moments are laid out on a per-character timeline, allowing you to see how each character contributes to the overall story of the series. Kilik, who is portrayed as the central hero of the story mode, has the most scenes.

While that sounds like standard fighting-game story fare, there's also Libra of Souls, a second story mode reminiscent of Soulcalibur II's Weapon Master mode. This marks the return of the beloved create-a-character feature. After creating a character modeled after one of the existing characters' fighting styles, you can choose several weapons for that style, each of which offers different stat bonuses in Libra of Souls.

The mode has you wandering the world looking for pieces of the Soul Edge through a series of text snippets (with cutscenes marking key moments). Some fights have your health ticking down, force you to end the round with a throw, or prevent you from using certain attacks. A leveling system means you may not be properly leveled for every fight, but you can hire mercenaries to replace your created fighter during these matches.

Bandai Namco estimates completing both of these modes will take around 20 hours, which should give even casual players something to sink their teeth into as they relearn the intricacies of Soulcalibur VI's immensely satisfying swordplay. » **Suriel Vazquez**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting (Online TBA)

» Publisher
Bandai Namco Entertainment

» Developer
Project Soul

» Release
October 16

Pinball FX 3

Zen studios adds real-world tables to long-running series

COMPLETE STRINGER TO LITE FEED FRENZY
AUTO CAST
1X
2X
4X
CAST AGAIN
LANE CHANGE
HOLD BUTTON FOR STATUS
FOR AMUSE
1 PLA
5 P
Williams

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Zen Studios

» Developer
Zen Studios

» Release
Fall

Since it launched in 2007, Zen Studios' Pinball FX series has been home to a host of original virtual pinball tables based on popular licenses like Star Wars and Marvel Comics, as well as its own creations based on themes like haunted houses and the old west. Pinball fans who wanted to play adaptations of their favorite real-world tables have had to look elsewhere, however. That's about to change.

Mel Kirk, vice president of publishing at Zen, says the team always wanted to work on the classic games, even as they carved their own successful path. Things opened up when WMS Industries didn't renew its license to Pinball FX's competitor, FarSight Studios' Pinball Arcade, earlier this year. "The rights became available, we jumped on it, and we now have global rights to the entire library of Williams/Bally," Kirk says. That library includes about 160 machines, but some are obviously more popular than others.

"In the office, when we announced what was going on, there was a huge debate about what should go first," Kirk says. "Of course you had some, 'Oh, you've got to do Twilight Zone and Addams Family,' and it's like, okay wait a minute. These are going to take a minute to sort out on the licensing side of things." While those will come later, the first batch includes four Williams tables: Fish Tales, Medieval Madness, Junkyard, and The Getaway. They're faithfully recreated from the originals, with the same art, sound effects, and gameplay that poolhall players will recognize.

We played through the initial batch, and they offer a subtle, but appreciable difference from the way Zen's tables have traditionally played. The physics are tuned to make the ball behave more realistically, and the flippers are appropriately less snappy. Most critically, it's possible to get to a "game over" screen faster than we've been accustomed to. "There's always a fine line between how long does a pinball game last and how long should it last," Kirk says. "The classic machines were designed to take your money." They have a different feel, but it's great to experience these tables again.

The next wave will probably be based on Bally tables, and it's also planned for a 2018 release. While the team has been disassembling machines in their Budapest studio to make sure they're accurately representing the art and mechanics, Kirk says the process of translating real tables is faster than designing them from scratch. He says building up the library of the classic tables is a priority for the team, and that they'll be releasing new packs as quickly as they can. Hopefully we'll be seeing some more familiar ones soon (cough, cough Earthshaker). **» Jeff Cork**

Williams
MEDIEVAL MADNESS

Rage 2

Hell on high wheels

The apocalypse is over in Rage 2. Humanity has found a way to heal the world, turning regions of the wasteland into lush jungles, wetlands, and even ice-covered tundra. The brutal way of life from the dying world still remains, however. These delicate biomes are under attack by gangs that want to control the resources. The Authority is also back, and is waging war against anyone who doesn't conform to their rule of law. Your home in Vineland is destroyed by the Authority, and you soon find yourself misplaced in this hostile world, doing everything you can to survive.

The world is more colorful now, but some of its elements remain unchanged from the original Rage. One of those fixtures is Dr. Antonin Kvasir, an old man who gently strokes a severed hand like a pet cat. He asks you to travel to Eden Space Center to recall the giant Eco-15 pod from orbit. The EcoPod's are the devices that terraform the wasteland. In this moment, the center is currently under control by bandits calling themselves the Goon Squad, a lawless group decked out in spiked shoulder pads, colored mohawks, and all of the fixings we've come to expect from the bad guys in the Mad Max films.

The Goon Squad is just one of the factions vying for control in this dangerous new world. You'll also run into a heavily armed group called the Immortal Shrouded. Their look falls more into the sci-fi category, with various masks obscuring their faces and giving them glowing eyes. The Immortal Shrouded specialize in cloaking technology, race around the wasteland in supped-up buggies, and are one of the most unpredictable groups in the game.

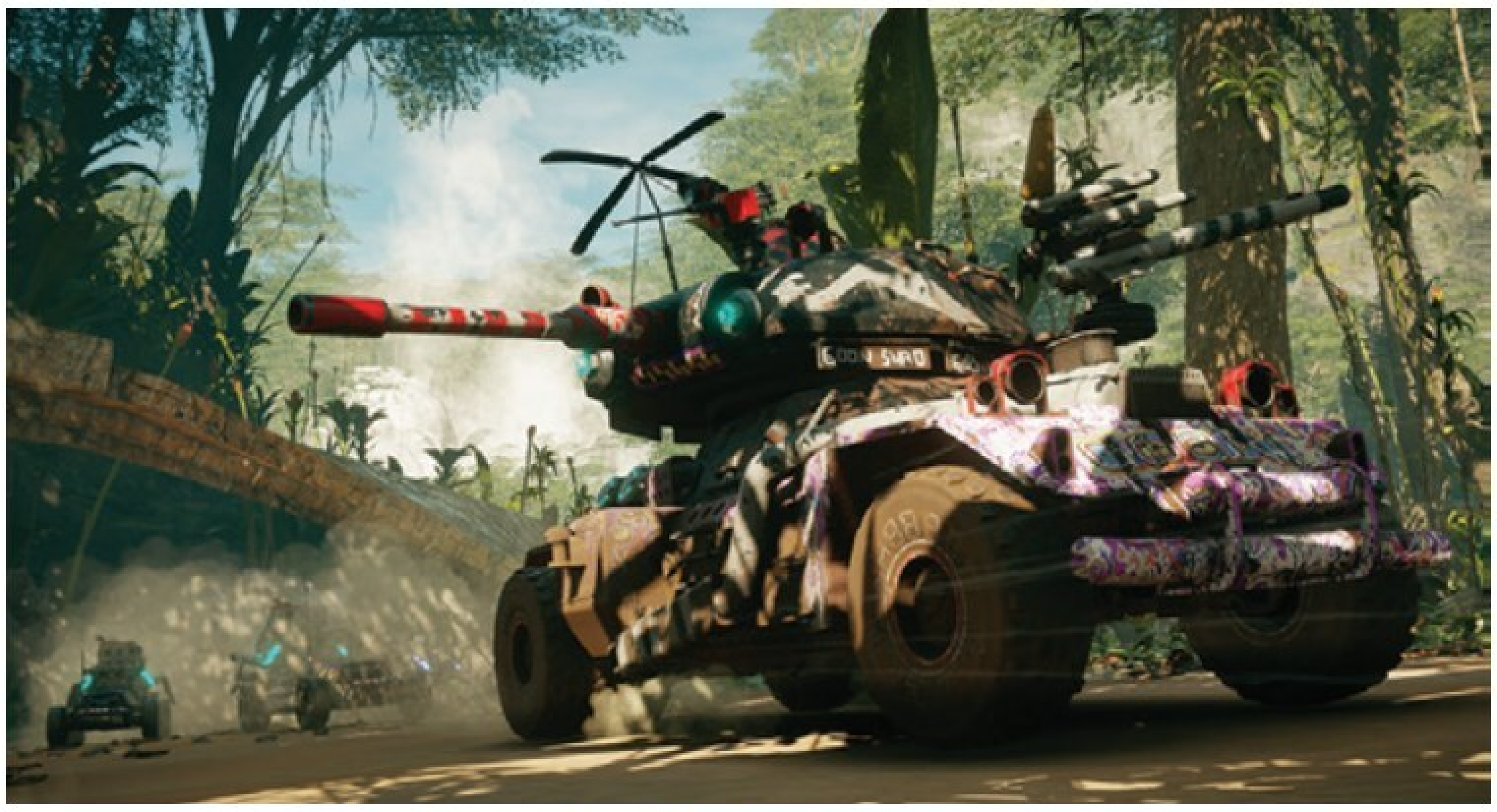
The swamplands are overrun by the River Hogs, a group that embraces the pirate lifestyle of chaotic plundering. After a lifetime of exposure to harmful chemicals, the Aboddon Mutants are less human than most factions, but are just as formidable thanks to genetic mutations that give them distinct combat advantages. One of these mutants is a giant monstrosity that looks like The Incredible Hulk.

The various factions are not just holed up in their respective territories. You'll find them on the move, sometimes hauling valuable supplies in convoys. Much like the convoys in Avalanche's other post-apocalyptic, open-world game, Mad Max, players can spot these rolling fortresses at great distances based on the dust they kick up. The convoys each offer a significant challenge, and are designed like boss battles.

One convoy is protecting a huge vehicle called the Phoenix, which Avalanche describes as a "rolling Rube Goldberg of pain." Protected by both bikers and buggies, the player must pick away at these defenses to expose the Phoenix, which drops electrified wires behind it. In a short gameplay clip, we saw the player take out this convoy with a heavily armed car, rocking twin machine guns and a hellfire mortar, which is fired using a slick targeting system that shows the blast zone on the terrain. The car can also quickly veer to the side to knock riders off of their bikes.

The player has a car they can keep upgrading as the adventure unfolds, but can also freely jack anything they see in the world, including monster trucks and gyrocopters.

The convoy is the only portion of the open world we've seen thus far. What other activities will we find scattered across the varied terrain types? It won't take long to find out. Avalanche plans to reveal more about the open world soon. » **Andrew Reiner**



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bethesda Softworks

» Developer
Avalanche Studios/
id Software

» Release
Spring

The Wingstick Returns

Boomerangs don't get enough respect in video games, but a variation of one was put to good use in id Sofware's Rage. The Wingstick is a three-bladed decapitation device that comes back to the player after doing its job. The projectile returns in Rage 2 with a meaningful upgrade. If the player holds the targeting reticle over an enemy for a few seconds, the Wingstick locks onto this target, and can take him or her out even if they hide around a corner.

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

82 Spider-Man

Whether you are dangling precariously from a web line during a heated battle against Vulture and Electro, or find yourself sending emotional texts to Mary Jane, Insomniac Games' Spider-Man delivers excitement and drama for the web-slinger and the guy under the mask. Both of their stories hit hard, and are backed by excellent gameplay, which varies from the always enjoyable web swinging to using a camera to break a case wide open.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Plagiarized. No independent thoughts or opinions. 80 percent other people's words.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Spider-Man

Spinning an amazing web

9.5

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Insomniac Games **Release** September 7 **Rating** E10+

PS4

» Concept
An open-world superhero experience that excels at city traversal, storytelling, and the pursuit of power

» Graphics
Spider-Man's animations often deserve an audible "wow." The city and character models also showcase high levels of detail

» Sound
John Paesano's soundtrack is epic and catchy. The voice work is also exceptional. Yuri Lowenthal kills it as Spider-Man, and Laura Bailey is the perfect Mary Jane

» Playability
The controls immediately empower you with the belief that you can do practically anything as Spider-Man. Web swinging is fluid, and combat is an intense workout

» Entertainment
The story shines as brightly as the gameplay – both deliver heart-pounding excitement

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Insomniac Games' Spider-Man is a triumph of superheroes and storytelling. Within a beautifully realized version of New York City, Spider-Man soars across the skyline with awe-inspiring grace, ducking into darkened alleys to pummel criminals in spectacular ways. The wall-crawler is front and center for most of this journey – spitting out quips and making a flashy show of heroism – but his mask frequently comes off to focus on Peter Parker's struggles with relationships and the unpredictability of life.

This complicated web is what separates this Spider-Man experience from the rest of the superhero games on the market. The story has a soul, and isn't afraid to slow down after a hard-hitting fight to show players Peter is every bit as interesting as his alter ego. Almost every move Spider-Man makes is worthy of a highlight reel, but some of the most notable moments are seen through the eyes of Mary Jane Watson and other characters.

Insomniac's decision to forego an origin story pays off handsomely for both the narrative and gameplay. Spider-Man doesn't freak out after punching someone for the first time; we see him in his prime as a force to be reckoned with. The second I gained control of him, I instantly felt like a hero who could handle any threat. He oozes power. His web swinging and acrobatic traversal are the most impressive elements, allowing players to rocket across the city by chaining together high-flying maneuvers. Running along walls, bouncing off of poles, and twirling through tight gaps are easily handled.

The web swinging is so much fun that I never once used the subway to fast travel. The city is a work of art that I continually marveled at for its architectural design and people-watching potential. Most of the exploration leads to discoveries and Spider-Man becoming more powerful. Yes, he's a seasoned veteran, but he's also a skilled inventor always making technological breakthroughs. By the time the credits roll, his power grows exponentially. With one press of the button, a group of enemies can be electrified or launched into the air (where they hovered in a stasis field). Gaining new toys is an incredibly satisfying element of this experience that Insomniac dangles masterfully like a carrot in front of the player.

Meaningful enhancements are also incorporated into the dozens of suits Peter assembles. From the Iron Spider Suit's awesome multi-legged attacks to the handy "Spider-Bro" companion equipped in the Stark Suit, there's no shortage of ways to mess with your adversaries.

Most of the story-based missions feature excellently designed combat sequences that use the environment well, both for enemy placement and stretching out Spidey's powers. The missions almost always offer an unpredictable element. One may feature environmental chaos, another could dive into Peter's mind for a dream-like moment.

You also can't rule out Mary Jane or another character getting involved. Control switches to these characters frequently, and at the right times. M.J.'s gameplay shows us why she's a great investigative reporter. The other character's sequences are some of the most shocking in the game. I enjoyed playing as both of these heroes (though not as much as Spidey), and they bring variety in fun ways, including solid stealth mechanics and clever puzzles.

The open world is filled with activities, though some fall victim to extensive repetition. Performing the same button taps to stop a speeding car grows old quickly, as does catching pigeons. The Taskmaster challenges are a good test of skill, and I love the breeziness of Black Cat's *Where's Waldo*-style photo missions. The city activities and Osborn missions are the weakest of the lot. The combat arenas, of which there are many types, are leaned on too much, especially in the final act.

Given how personal this story is for Peter, many of the villains are bred from his relationships. In a way, the game is an origin story for them. They receive plenty of screen time, and are brilliantly tied to Peter's life. Mr. Negative wasn't a household name before, but he will be now. He exudes a different type of evil than we usually see. His defining moment occurs in a surprisingly disturbing sequence.

Like Batman: Arkham Asylum before it, Spider-Man raises the bar for one of the world's most beloved heroes. You feel like you're doing everything he's capable of. Insomniac succeeds in making Peter and the supporting cast just as memorable and engaging as the wall crawler. The last story frame is a real shocker that will make the wait for the sequel almost unbearable. » **Andrew Reiner**

We Happy Few

The high is worth the comedown

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Gearbox Publishing **Developer** Compulsion Games **Release** August 10 **Rating** M

We Happy Few tells the story of a society hopped up on literal happy pills, trying to avoid anything that interrupts its collective high. Similarly, playing We Happy Few is often intoxicating, but the high is interrupted by small issues that prevent it from attaining pure bliss. Thankfully, an intriguing world full of fascinating mysteries and enjoyable missions make Compulsion Games' dark, open-world title worth the journey down the rabbit hole.

Players explore Wellington Wells, a British archipelago devastated by the war and cut off from civilization in an alternate version of 1964. The government mandates citizens take Joy, a hallucinogenic drug that instills an overwhelming sense of bliss in its users. Those who have rejected Joy are exiled, and those who dare enter the city noticeably sober are chased and beaten by citizens and police alike.

You control three characters, each with their own campaign, as they reject the drugs and try to escape to the mainland. Each character feels separate thanks to distinct skill trees and unique attributes; Arthur can blend in and run fast, Sally is an influential chemical genius who can craft the highest-tier concoctions and walk outside without suspicion, and Ollie is a brash brute with the ability to hit harder, carry more items in his inventory, and tinker with mechanical creations. Each character's story is compelling, and by the time they wrapped up, I was fully invested in their individual struggles.

Tense stealth sequences, frantic chases, and desperate fights help the main and side missions create exciting scenarios; sneaking into the belly of the beast past tons of hostile NPCs on your way to revealing a massive conspiracy is thrilling. However, the missions are too often fetch quests, and getting a single item frequently turns into an annoying chain reaction of favors for multiple NPCs. As missions push you to retrieve items and help people from the various islands, you continually bounce between society and the outskirts; this can be problematic, since you must conform to your current area in both appearance and mental state to avoid angry mobs.

When the inevitable misstep occurs and you're thrown into combat, fighting is a simple-yet-enjoyable experience with first-person melee combat that keeps you blocking or attacking with an eye on a stamina meter. Weapons break after steady use, but I always had a realiable supply of backups so I never felt strapped for a weapon after the initial moments. You can also upgrade weapons to augment their attacks with elements and ailments. For example, one late-game weapon I crafted was not only indestructible, but was imbued with electricity and delivered upgraded damage.

Weapons aren't all you find. We Happy Few is a loot-fest that practically requires you to scrounge everywhere you visit. Finding a huge cache of resources never ceases to excite. However, some missions require you to have certain crafting items in your inventory to progress. On a few occasions, my progress was halted for hours as I struggled to stumble upon the object I needed. While you're able to continue with side missions and other exploration while you scour for that item, it slams the brakes on your progress for the mission you were working on.

This issue of not being able to find essential resources carries into additional mechanics introduced in the second and third campaigns. Without spoiling anything, Sally has something at her house she needs to tend to regularly throughout the campaign. Ignoring her obligation slowly eats up inventory space until she returns home to complete her duties. Similarly, Ollie's blood sugar drops rapidly and he must regularly take glucose injections or his stamina is dramatically cut and he hurls insults at random passersby, inciting fights. While these are fun ideas, the execution often makes for unfun situations.

Interrupting the enjoyable flow of the missions to regularly trudge back to Sally's residence is irritating, and I often struggled to find the necessary ingredients to craft the items needed for both Sally and Ollie. Dropping weapons to free up Sally's shrinking inventory space, or playing through part of Ollie's story with half stamina because I can't find any syringes emphasizes the restrictive mechanics rather than the things the game does well.

We Happy Few also suffers from technical issues, ranging from NPCs falling through the floor to showing they lack contextual awareness by yelling at you to get out of their house when you're not in a house. On multiple occasions, I was in the middle of a fight and an enemy got stuck torso-deep in the floor. I never encountered any game-breaking bugs, but these problems broke the immersion on multiple occasions.

While We Happy Few is dragged down by irritating missions, scarce-but-necessary resources, and technical blips from time to time, it's a fun adventure that combines an eerie atmosphere and a gripping narrative to great effect.

» **Brian Shea**

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Mac • Linux

» Concept
Explore a series of small British islands cut off from the rest of the world and hopped up on government-mandated hallucinogenic drugs

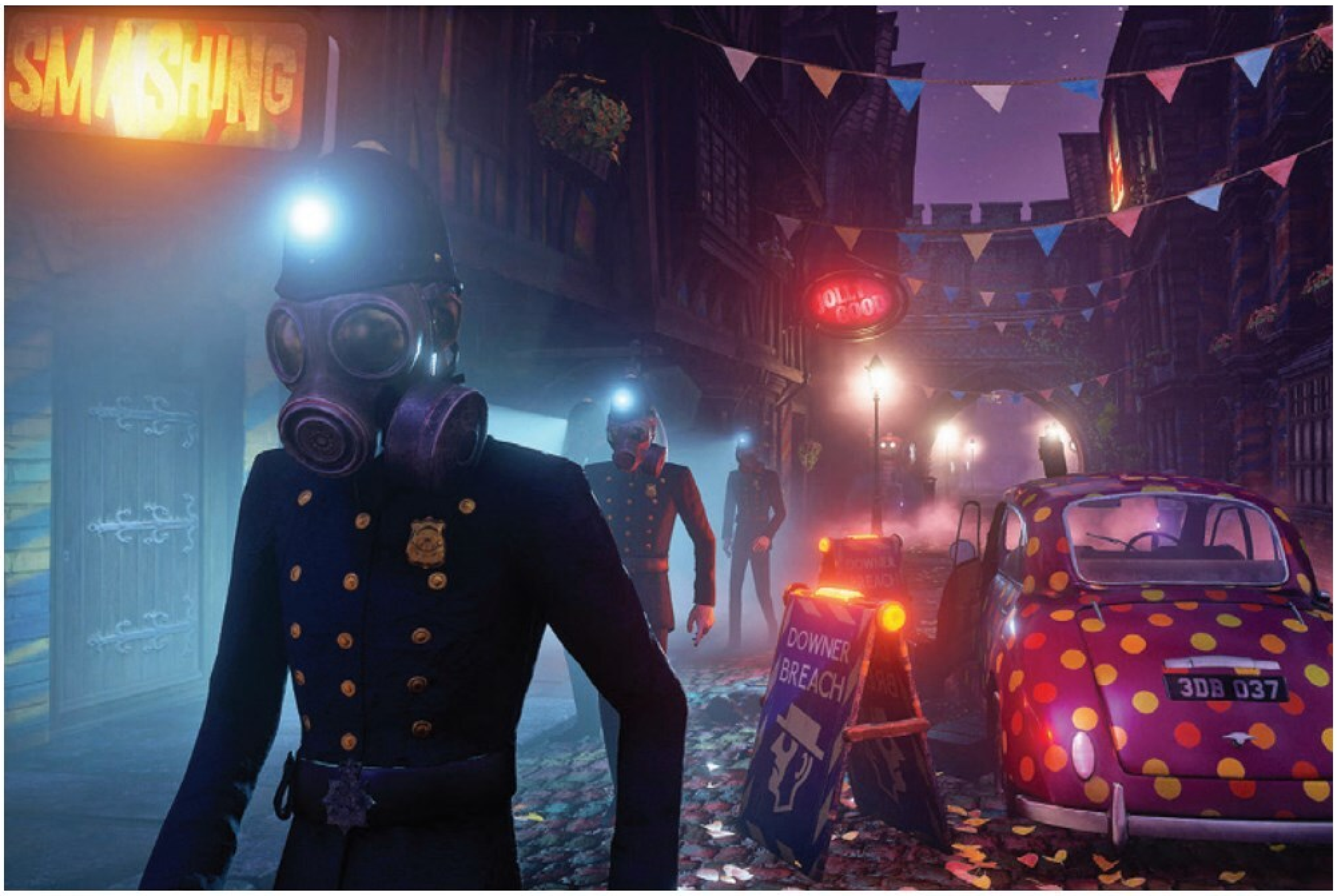
» Graphics
The bright colors and cartoony graphics are appealing, creating some gorgeous views

» Sound
Stumbling upon a warped record playing distorted songs never ceases to add a haunting layer to the atmosphere

» Playability
Simple combat makes for a shallow learning curve, but figuring out where to find specific items can take a little more time to grasp

» Entertainment
We Happy Few delivers an intoxicating experience, rife with dark mysteries to unravel and exciting missions to complete, but some annoying mechanics and scarce resources keep it from reaching greatness

» Replay Value
Moderate



Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

Relying on the past

8.25

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Armor Project, Square Enix **Release** September 4 **Rating** T

PS4 • PC

» Concept
As the chosen one, go on an adventure that takes you across land and sea, and high in the sky to save the world from a sinister force

» Graphics
Visuals look the best they ever have, but don't expect to be wowed compared to other modern games

» Sound
Voices fit the characters for the most part, but some feel off – like Erik's inconsistent New York accent. Music paints the world well, but some tunes get overused

» Playability
Dragon Quest XI keeps things simplistic but hides a challenge, forcing you to think through every turn in combat or suffer the consequences

» Entertainment
This isn't a shake up for the series and can sometimes feel dated, but the long, hard-fought adventure comes together in an engaging way

» Replay Value
Moderate

As the longest-running Japanese RPG series, Dragon Quest has never strayed too far from its classic roots. If you're a fan, you know what to expect: turn-based combat, a silent protagonist, and a grand adventure to save the world. In some ways, this franchise shows its age. In others, it's a great reminder of what made RPGs fun in the first place, with epic boss battles, hidden treasure, and party members who grow on and off the battlefield. Dragon Quest XI retains this satisfying progression, but it doesn't reinvent or modernize the series.

Saving the world is a common goal in gaming; who doesn't want to be a hero and overcome daunting odds? Dragon Quest XI embraces this fully. You play as "The Luminary," a boy fated from birth to be the savior from dark forces threatening the land. The plot isn't groundbreaking and takes its sweet time to get going, but some clever twists along the way make your patience pay off. Moreover, the way party members come together is well done, especially as you explore their backstories and discover why they ended up on the path to help.

The core gameplay remains simple but fun, showing that the turn-based combat can still be intense. I especially love the challenging boss battles. Outsmarting your opponent requires using buffs, focusing on healing, and making the most of your pep powers. The latter is like the tension system in previous games, randomly activating a temporary heightened state to land criticals and perform powerful combo attacks.

You can only have four active members in your party, but you have multiple heroes to choose from to suit your play style. I appreciate the variety of the weapons and specialties each one adds to the mix. For instance, Erik is a thief focused on trickery and agility, while a support character like Serena has restorative magic and buffs. The members all feel balanced, having their own strengths and weaknesses, giving you a lot of options for your loadout. Serena may be a mage, but she can still wield a spear to make her more attack-oriented.

Characters automatically receive new skills and stat boosts, but you also have some control over their growth via the character builder. Leveling up grants you points that unlock new attributes, like more proficiency with a weapon, restoring MP after battle, or taking advantage of specialty skills. For instance, Sylvando is a showman, so you can exploit his charm abilities. This new, accessible skill system works well, as it lets you focus on specific categories for each character by unlocking nodes on a hexagonal grid that then open up more options for battle. I loved saving up my skill points and watching the dividends pay off with game-changing abilities, whether it was a new devastating attack or gaining the chance to cast two spells in a row for the cost of one. Throw in collecting materials to forge better armor, and you're always shooting for the next best thing, which provides motivation to explore.

With activities like gambling, treasure hunts, and locating collectibles, the world has plenty to do – but it's just not impressive. The side content is mostly tedious fetch quests. In addition, everything feels behind the times. The length between save points can be brutal, and sometimes you can lose a whole dungeon's worth of progress by hitting the challenging end boss with no save point in sight. Some late bosses require grinding if you want to succeed; I thrive on challenging bosses that test my mastery of the battle system, but even if you play your cards just right, sometimes it just comes down to needing to gain levels in these battles of attrition.

Dragon Quest XI stays true to the series' sense of adventure, and the long journey culminates in something cool for longtime fans (be sure to reload your save after the credits roll). At times, I was glued to my controller as I discovered the next village, plot revelation, or impressive boss. Dragon Quest has stuck around for a reason: It does what it does well, and the formula still works. However, Dragon Quest XI's lack of evolution is a hindrance. It's about time the series took some risks. » **Kimberley Wallace**

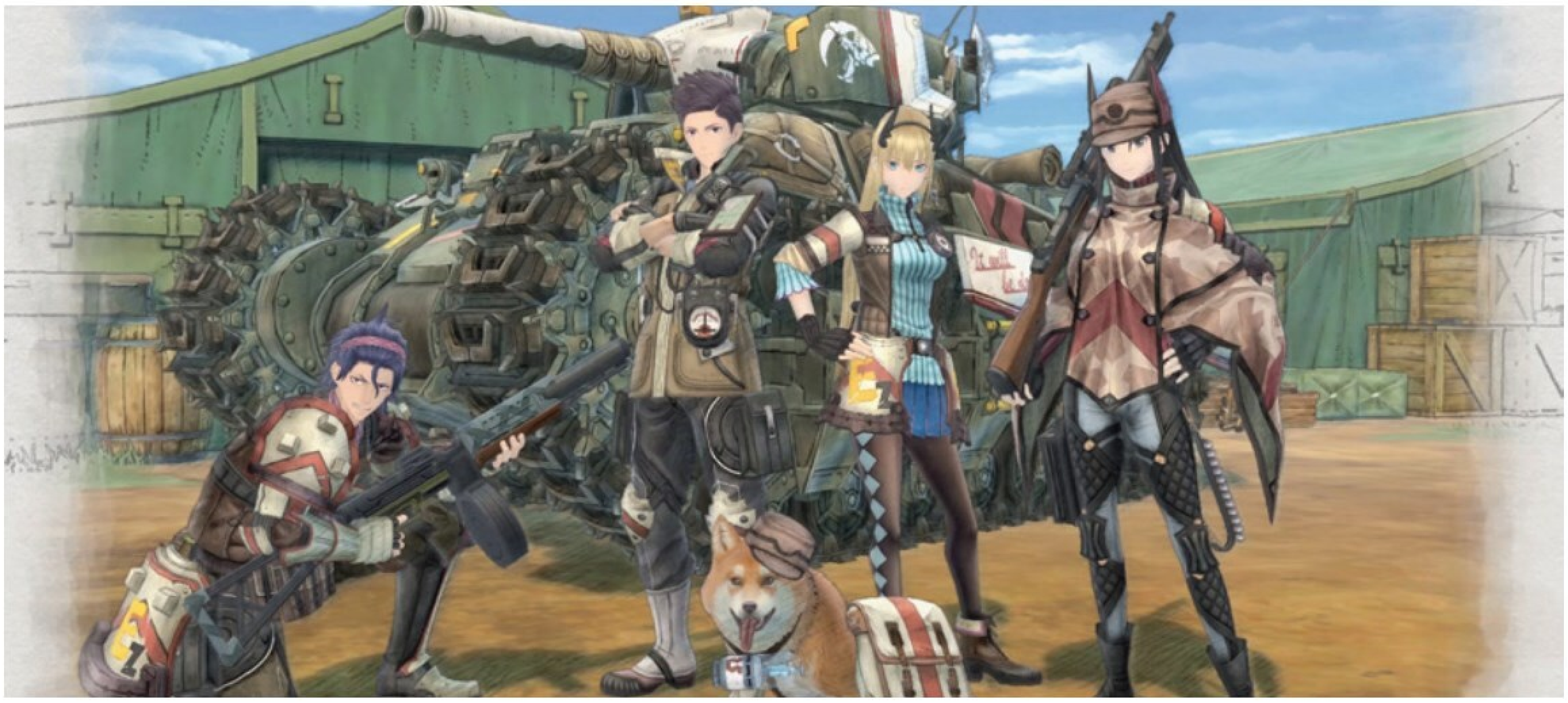
Valkyria Chronicles 4

Back in fighting form

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega **Release** September 25 **Rating** T

9



War is a common backdrop for many games, and different genres provide players various ways to experience it, whether through the strategy of command or the urgency of ground combat. The thrill of the Valkyria Chronicles series is how it blends these two approaches; conflict becomes a puzzle to be solved as you assess the situation from a tactical map, then control individual units directly to gain the advantage. This compelling approach to warfare remains at the core of Valkyria Chronicles 4, but this sequel does more than march in step behind its predecessors.

Valkyria Chronicles 4 largely ignores the PSP sequels and gets back to what I loved about the original entry (like big and varied maps populated by plenty of units), then makes up for lost time with smart additions. The most impactful change is the new grenadiers, who fire mortar-like grenades from afar and provide interception fire, allowing them to clear the way for other infantry while effectively punishing enemy advances. Using them to take out enemies in defensive positions is especially fun, and opens up a new array of strategic options. I also love the leader units' ability to bring squad mates along for move actions, ensuring slower troops like lancers and grenadiers don't get left behind. You also earn the ability to call in naval support later, but it is available too inconsistently to play a major role in your planning.

These factors combine to take the puzzle-like quality of encounters to a new level. Finding a path to victory carries the same satisfaction as untangling a devious knot; you pull a string in one place to see how your enemy responds, which creates an opening to exploit elsewhere. Distract a boss so you can score a headshot from behind, or draw a tank away from the base it guards. The number of viable options are impressive. Heap buffs on a single unit and dash for the objective, or employ a traditional multi-pronged advance. Personally, I love the gambits that only barely work. My first time defeating the final boss using the expected tactics took nine turns. When I replayed the mission, I used an unconventional alternative that ended the fight in two. That kind of flexibility is rewarding, and encourages experimentation.

After the battle is won, you earn XP and money to level up your classes, upgrade equipment, and outfit vehicles. Despite being linear at first, you eventually get more gratifying avenues for customization. Do you prioritize firepower, movement, or defense when considering how to allocate your tank's limited capacity for new parts? Different situations call for different loadouts, but if you want to get a general leg up, you can grind skirmish battles or story missions, though I never hit a wall that required it.

Valkyria Chronicles 4 doesn't demand prior experience with the series, since it tells one squad's standalone story. Though it presents a fantasy-infused vision of World War II, it conveys real human struggles in clever ways. Soldiers have biographies you can read, but their personalities truly come out in "potentials" that trigger under specific conditions. One character drinks to escape a past failure, which manifests as the "hammered" potential that ends her turn prematurely. You learn more about characters as you use them, culminating in special side missions starring a handful of linked squad mates. These were my favorite rewards, because they have satisfying narrative payoffs in addition to the practical benefits of granting new potentials or changing negative ones.

As much as I enjoyed the character development, the storytelling in the main campaign falls flat. The plot is interesting and the setting is gorgeous, but the scarcity of cinematics and reliance on animated portraits rob many moments of their intended gravity – including some major scenes that feel especially shortchanged. Along with some crass language and sexual references that are tonally inconsistent, this is the main area where Valkyria Chronicles 4 feels outdated rather than a return to classic form.

After aircraft were introduced to military operations during World War I, they changed the shape of warfare. They opened up a field of conflict above the land and sea, and even though tanks and infantry still worked the way they always did, new considerations altered the ways they were deployed and used. Valkyria Chronicles 4 does not actually have aircraft, but the innovations it brings have an analogous effect on the turn-based strategy of this series. Though familiar mechanics and units remain, excellent new features and conveniences transform the way you see the battlefield. » **Joe Juba**

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Take command of strategic, turn-based encounters that feel more like puzzles than firefights. An interesting cast and unique setting make your time away from battle rewarding, too

» Graphics
A beautiful art style gives the visuals a sketchbook quality, but fewer talking-head conversations (and more cinematic cutscenes) could have sold the setting even more

» Sound
Composer Hitoshi Sakimoto crafted an excellent score that mixes in new music with familiar tunes from the series' past

» Playability
Controlling your troops is straightforward. Unit selection can be finicky, and they occasionally get hung up on obstacles while moving, but those are rare and minor inconveniences – especially since you can save and load during battle as a safety net

» Entertainment
This is a fantastic return for a series that has been struggling with its identity. Large maps and interesting abilities give you the freedom to explore different strategic opportunities, and your ingenuity pays off with enticing rewards

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Madden NFL 19

The ups and downs of another gripping season

8

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 10 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Unlike last year, developer EA Tiburon has included new features for multiple modes, including Franchise

» **Graphics**
New pre-game and halftime shows look good, as do the players on the field thanks to the lighting

» **Sound**
The amount and variations of audio lines for the two Bullfrogs announcers in Longshot: Homecoming is impressive

» **Playability**
New moves like the one cut and shorter catch windows are present, but they don't dominate the gameplay experience

» **Entertainment**
I still have a lot of fun playing Madden – with the different modes catering to different moods – but the improvements to the experience are not major

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

I can't tell you how many Maddens I've reviewed, and how many more I've played. But believe it or not, I still get charged orchestrating a back-breaking 80-yard drive, getting a coveted draft pick in Franchise mode, or sniping cards in Ultimate Team. Madden 19 sits in an awkward position; some of the new features and additions I like but don't love, others I'm indifferent to.

The new player progression in Franchise mode is one of Madden 19's calling cards, but it made me work harder to get the results I wanted. You still earn XP for your players, but instead of using it to buy points for the attributes of your choice, you buy an approximated player archetype upgrade that raises your overall rating one point and awards you randomized bonuses for the attributes pre-assigned to that archetype. I don't mind that this system treats progression as a squishy unknown. However, I dislike its rigid offensive and defensive schemes.

The schemes you pick determine which player archetypes earn extra XP during training and have a better chance of hitting the randomization jackpot, but they can't accommodate your designs. What if I want to employ the Run & Shoot offensive scheme, but don't want to put points into turning my running back into a receiving back even though that's the archetypical role determined by the scheme? You can still spend points into related archetypes and hope randomization rolls your way, but if your players aren't a scheme fit, then you're not getting the most from the system.

Other than the new way to progress players, the Franchise mode is largely the same. The one addition that can make a big difference is the ability to create custom drafts. Ironically, this feature gives fans what the progression system takes away: control.

Control has also been taken away in Longshot: Homecoming, the final story for Devin Wade and Colt Cruise. The mode has almost no choices in it, but its larger problem is that even though it's good to catch up with Devin and Colt, the story and its new characters tread well-worn territory too familiar to be exciting. The story, as the name indicates, focuses more on Mathis, Texas than the NFL, and some of its beats even mirror FIFA's The Journey.

Regardless, Madden still has some of that veteran magic. I particularly like this year's passing game; it's strangely fun because incompletions are more frequent. QBs cause some of this with their throws, but sometimes it's because a receiver can't hold onto the ball after contact.

The other half of the offense – the running game – also has its ups and downs. The new one cut plant-and-accelerate move (for offense and defense) is good out in the open, but is hampered by running backs' continued sluggishness around the line of scrimmage and the animations that run before you expect them to.

Madden Ultimate Team continues to capture the addictive fantasy football aspect of the sport, with a less costly upgrade system for certain cards and new ways to earn coins, packs, and items through Solo Battles (games against the A.I. using real users' teams) and Squads Challenges with your friends in co-op against A.I. opponents. These are more avenues for a mode that does a good job of providing different paths to assembling your team.

Madden 19 doesn't have earth-shattering features that draw me in. Some new features don't shake out how I hoped they might, and other problems haven't been fixed. But I'm still going to spend hours with this title for the way it captures the sport and puts me in the center of it with some fantastic gameplay moments.

Being a video game sports fan and a fan of real-life sports is no different. Sometimes things don't always go the way you think they might, but if you can't find joy in being a part of it all, then perhaps you need to find something else to invest your time into.

» **Matthew Kato**

Madden On PC Comes Out Of Retirement

The first PC edition of Madden in a decade performs just like the console versions, except the game simulation times in Franchise mode are about cut in half and the menus stutter a little less. Longshot cutscenes are also smoother, but not overly so. The PC version has mouse/keyboard support as well as a suite of customary graphics options, but it doesn't support mods or have dedicated servers, so its advantage over the other versions is only slight.

The Banner Saga 3

A brutal end to a long journey

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Versus Evil **Developer** Stoic **Release** July 26 **Rating** M

Since the first Banner Saga's release in 2014, developer Stoic has strived to create an epic adventure set in a snowy world inspired by Viking mythology. In the first two games, a dark storm impressing itself upon the world forces a group of humans and giants to work together for survival. They strike out to find sanctuary and hold out against the darkness – and the army of stone soldiers it's brought in its wake. Both games required players to make tough choices during the The Oregon Trail-inspired journey where a stranger on the road could be a new hero to use in battle, or a scout for bandits waiting to slit the throats of your clansmen. The third Banner Saga successfully concludes an odyssey that's always been about holding players accountable for their choices, but the ride is still bumpy as the end of the road approaches.

Picking up immediately after the end of Banner Saga 2, this installment splits our time between two protagonists. The first group spends their time holding out in a fortress at the end of the world as enemies descend and supplies dwindle. Meanwhile, in the belly of the planet, a small group of warriors leads a suicide mission at the core of the darkness in the hope of killing it. Both sides of the tale are compelling, and you must make smart choices for survival in different ways. The fortress segments have you negotiating politics, like who will lead the kingdom assuming you survive this onslaught, and managing supplies for various factions in order to keep the peace. The suicide mission segments require you to settle petty disputes and manage the egos of your party as you undertake this dangerous task.

In a smart, topsy-turvy design decision, Banner Saga 3 upends the series' signature counter at the top of the screen. In the previous games, this counter kept track of the days you had traveled, giving a clear sense of the breadth of your journey. Now the counter has become a countdown, tracking how long until your fortress breaks against the waves of darkness at the gate. This takes into account all the choices you've made throughout the series, factoring in your supplies and how many clansmen you've kept alive. You're not screwed if you've made poor choices throughout the series (you just have to engage in more battles), but it's a strong feature that makes you feel the echo of all your decisions throughout Banner Saga as a whole.

The battle system is essentially unchanged from the first two games. A new mechanic has characters earning titles to receive various stat bonuses, but everything else is familiar. You're still moving on a tile-based battlefield, using your units to take out the enemy opposition. I spent most of the battles wanting to barrel through them to get back to the story. The battles aren't a chore, but they also don't stand out next to genre siblings like Fire Emblem and XCOM. Luckily the narrative is the main drive here.

The Banner Saga 3 stays true to the series' bleak ethos of crushing consequences for difficult choices. You don't have as many decisions to make in this entry, since it is focused on holding you accountable for your previous actions, but the occasional choices all have devastating consequences that shape the endgame in dramatic ways, like losing a prominent character or shaping the world in certain ways. My only complaint is that characters don't get enough time to shine. The previous two entries were good about taking a minute so you could talk with people in your party and get to know them. The fast pace of the story in The Banner Saga 3, constantly pushing you toward the end, means that character development is often eschewed. Sometimes I'd lose a character to a bad choice and shrug my shoulders, because I felt like The Banner Saga hadn't done the legwork to make me care for them. However, most losses, especially for the characters who have been with the caravan since the first game, are appropriately heart-rending.

As a standalone game, The Banner Saga 3 is the weakest of the bunch. As a conclusion, it does its job well, marrying beauty to melancholy and making me think long and hard about what sacrifices I was willing to make for the good of the world. Though I left my time with my caravan wishing I had been given more opportunities to get to know them better, I still felt my long trek through blood and snow was worth having, and Stoic's somber adventure has lived up to its exhausting ambitions.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

8

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Lead your caravan of bickering humans, centaurs, and giants to ruin or salvation in the conclusion of this snowy epic

» **Graphics**
Beautiful art that recalls the strongest works of Don Bluth (Dragon's Lair) remains one of Banner Saga's finest qualities, though the limited animation is a shame

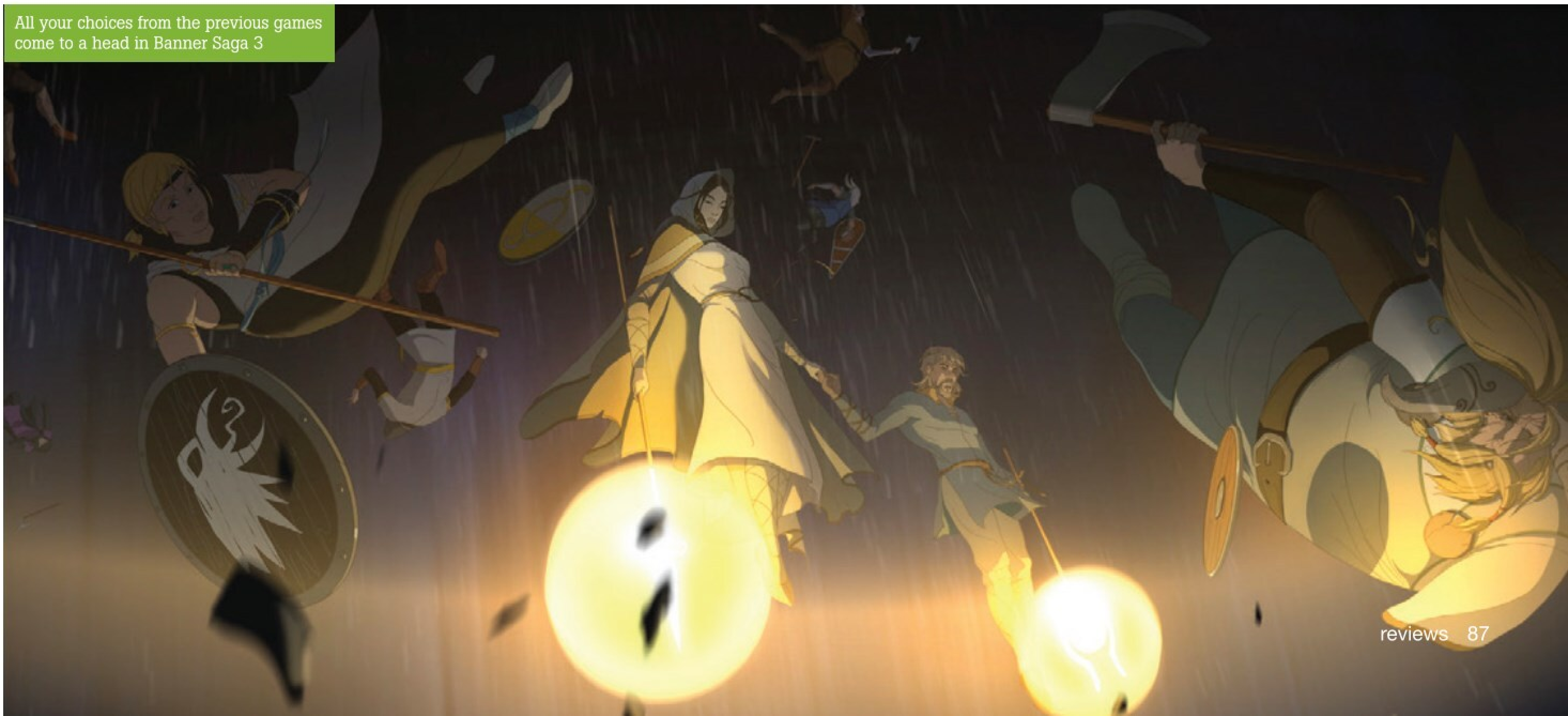
» **Sound**
The soundtrack ping pongs between soft, subtle tragedy and orchestral action in a pleasing way. The voice work is sparse but effective when used

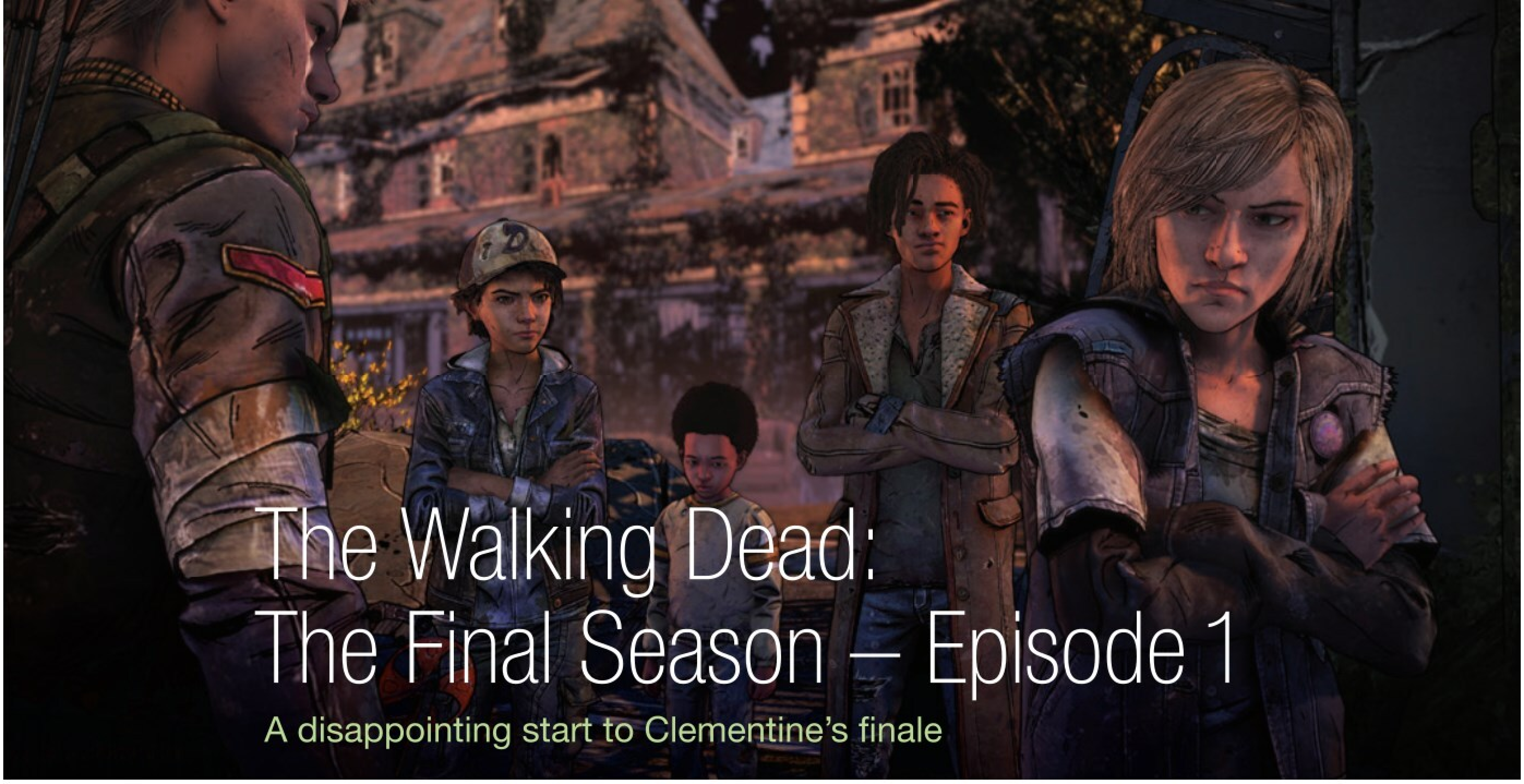
» **Playability**
The strategy gameplay is straightforward once you play the tutorial battle and get a handle on your units' special abilities

» **Entertainment**
This concluding chapter is uneven due to breakneck pacing and minimal characterization, but it's ultimately a satisfying finale that remains true to the melancholy soul of the series

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

All your choices from the previous games come to a head in Banner Saga 3





The Walking Dead: The Final Season – Episode 1

A disappointing start to Clementine's finale

7

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Telltale Games **Developer** Telltale Games **Release** August 14 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC
iOS • Android

» Concept
Take control of Clementine again and navigate a dangerous world with a child in tow

» Graphics
The visuals have improved, with more detailed environments and better-looking character models, but the engine shows its age

» Sound
Voice acting reigns supreme as it brings emotion and life to each and every character

» Playability
The controls remain intuitive, with Telltale exploring more creative ways to use quick-time events

» Entertainment
With predictable moments and repetitive storylines, the season premiere isn't all that exciting. Hopefully, future episodes have more surprises and intriguing developments in store

» Replay Value
Moderate

After six years, we're finally reaching the conclusion of Telltale's The Walking Dead – which also means the end of our time with fan-favorite character Clementine. Video games rarely give us the opportunity to watch a character grow up over the years, but we've seen Clementine go from a naïve and inexperienced little girl to a hardened and resourceful survivor. That transformation came with ups and downs that never recaptured the magic of the debut season, and the first episode of this final season is a reminder of that, with *another* group of survivors scavenging for food and safety amid the overflow of deadly zombies.

We're back in Clementine's shoes after spending last season controlling Javier and seeing the apocalypse through the lens of his family. The opener doesn't really acknowledge much about that time in Clementine's life, but gets straight into the action with Clementine finally being reunited with A.J., a child she's tried to take care of since he lost his parents just after birth. Clementine is coming full circle, doing for A.J. what Lee did for her by teaching him the art of survival. While the parallels are overt (alongside shoehorned-in references to Lee), A.J. is the first character we've met who hasn't known a life before the apocalypse. This is intriguing, as most survivors fight because they know things can be better, while A.J. merely accepts his world. The story quickly taps into certain tendencies that have developed in A.J. from living this way; he doesn't like loud noises, he lacks empathy, and he enters every situation on high alert. That's about the only new, intriguing thread that surfaces here.

The premiere episode has all the staples we've come to know from the series: zombie fights, a new group of survivors, and heat-of-the-moment decisions for survival. While these threads are part of the appeal of zombie-apocalypse stories, I often felt like I was just going through the motions with predictable patterns. I could see the betrayals and dangers from a mile away. At times I felt like I was walking into a trap, like when you watch a horror movie and want to yell, "Get out of there!" at oblivious characters. The dialogue options don't even let you express reservations about these moments, causing a disconnect between the authored story and how players think Clementine should react.

Clementine has been an interesting character, but this episode is inconsistent with her growth throughout the seasons. Zombie attacks, ally betrayals, and death are commonplace for her, so she should have her guard up. Instead, this episode ignores her years of experience in this world. She's too trusting, and it feels dishonest to the character. So many times I thought, "Clementine would know better than this." For instance, a big part of this installment is her forming an alliance with a new group of young survivors that have turned a large, secluded school into their safehouse. While she knows nothing about this group, she instantly joins up with them. I was disappointed that I had to get to know a new set of survivors so quickly; I wanted to get some quality time with just Clementine and AJ. At least the group is diverse, representing different races and sexualities alongside having their own having their own personality quirks and pasts to uncover. A laid-back, kindhearted musician provides a softer, more calming persona, while a closed-off, headstrong woman exemplifies the struggle that comes with living in this depressing landscape after a romantic partner dies.

The new season is an upgrade in visuals, looking more akin to *The Walking Dead* comic. Telltale has also made the interactive sequences more creative, whether it's killing zombies or harpooning fish. You now have the option to stun, stab, or activate traps to kill zombies, while catching fish becomes a minigame about aiming and timing throwing your harpoon just right. The relationship-building still takes center stage, with you choosing between characters and having your actions affect your favorability with them. I liked that Telltale brought back decisions that let you decide between two places to visit with different characters to bond with at each, allowing you to feel like you need to sacrifice to get the payoffs you want.

I've enjoyed Telltale's The Walking Dead for its shocking reveals and difficult choices, but not much of that was present in the opener. This premiere does little to excite me for the rest of the season; the set-up feels too predictable and familiar. I'm interested in seeing where Clementine's story ends and if my choices really shape the type of person A.J. becomes, but this is a weak start. Hopefully, the next episodes can provide something more unique for fans. Right now, the emotional impact is missing, the decisions aren't hard-hitting, and the twists are easy to see coming. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Guacamelee 2

An excellent but familiar return to the ring

game informer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** DrinkBox Studios **Developer** DrinkBox Studios **Release** August 21 **Rating** E10+

The first Guacamelee didn't demand a sequel. It told a succinct and satisfying story, and fully explored its mechanics while nailing the Metroid style of exploration. Guacamelee 2 doesn't radically change the gameplay established by the first game, but with combat and platforming improvements, a worthwhile story, and better challenges, this is the follow-up I didn't know I wanted.

Guacamelee 2 picks up seven years after the events of the original game's good ending. Juan is a family man now, raising his children with his wife, who is working on her dissertation. Though his life is different, the gameplay remains familiar. Juan is thrust back into the hero role, exploring a connected world, fighting enemies, and finding new abilities that unlock new routes. The areas are designed well and do a great job leading you down a path to discover something and then giving you a shortcut back to the starting line toward your next destination. It means you rarely get lost or have to backtrack through the labyrinth and you get to see exciting new areas and challenges at a steady clip.

Juan also earns the ability early on to jump between the worlds of the living and the dead at will. The level layout does not change when you swap, but platforms may disappear, and areas that were previously safe may suddenly become lethal. This leads to some of the most engaging challenges as you swap between dimensions to avoid danger while doing high-speed platforming and defeating enemies.

Both the combat and platforming boast precise controls. Building up big combos against enemies is fun and gets easier as you level up your special attacks, which double as navigation tools. The uppercut functions as a double jump, and plays into a clever mechanic where breaking through the shields of certain enemies requires specific attacks. A glowing blue enemy requires Juan's sideways thrust ability, which also breaks blue doors, and gives the extra distance often needed to hit a just out-of-reach ledge. This shield-breaking system means you are constantly using Juan's entire arsenal of moves, preventing you from relying on a favorite attack and approaching fights a little bit like a puzzle. It made every battle consistently exciting.

Along with dimension swapping and all of his combat and navigation abilities, Juan can also turn into a chicken to enter small tunnels. The chicken can do nearly everything Juan can, including fight. In the first game, the chicken felt like a significantly weaker version of Juan, but here the chicken form is an extension of Juan with its own additional distinct abilities like being able to boost upward through the air multiple times and dash over spike pits with ease.

The world is littered with isolated platforming challenges that test Juan's limits and the player's abilities, but you don't need to complete all of them to see the end credits. One has you climbing high into the sky frequently swapping back and forth between chicken and human, while another places you on a dead sprint to avoid the dimension where the world is full of lava. I eagerly embraced these gauntlets whenever I came across them because they offer big rewards and are quick and easy to retry when you fail.

The game supports local co-op for up to four players, who can easily drop in and out. This is a nice inclusion, but I much preferred playing on my own. When the screen is crowded with multiple players, the difficult platforming sections get frustrating.

The narrative never takes itself too seriously, but amid all the jokes, the sincerity surrounding the relationships Juan has with his friends and family are treated with a great deal of respect. Seeing different versions of characters in different timelines is interesting and both of the endings are satisfying in surprisingly sweet ways. If you plan on seeing the best ending, I recommending beating it once before hitting 100 percent to see both ways the story concludes. It's worth it.

Guacamelee 2 is one of the best executions of the Metroid formula. Juan's adventure stands apart in a crowded genre, even if stands apart in the same ways as his last outing. Combat is always exciting, the upgrades change the way you fight and navigate the world in meaningful ways, the world is well-designed, and the optional challenges are substantial and rewarding.
» **Kyle Hilliard**

8.75

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Wrestle your way through an adventure across multiple timelines that takes its primary inspiration from Metroid

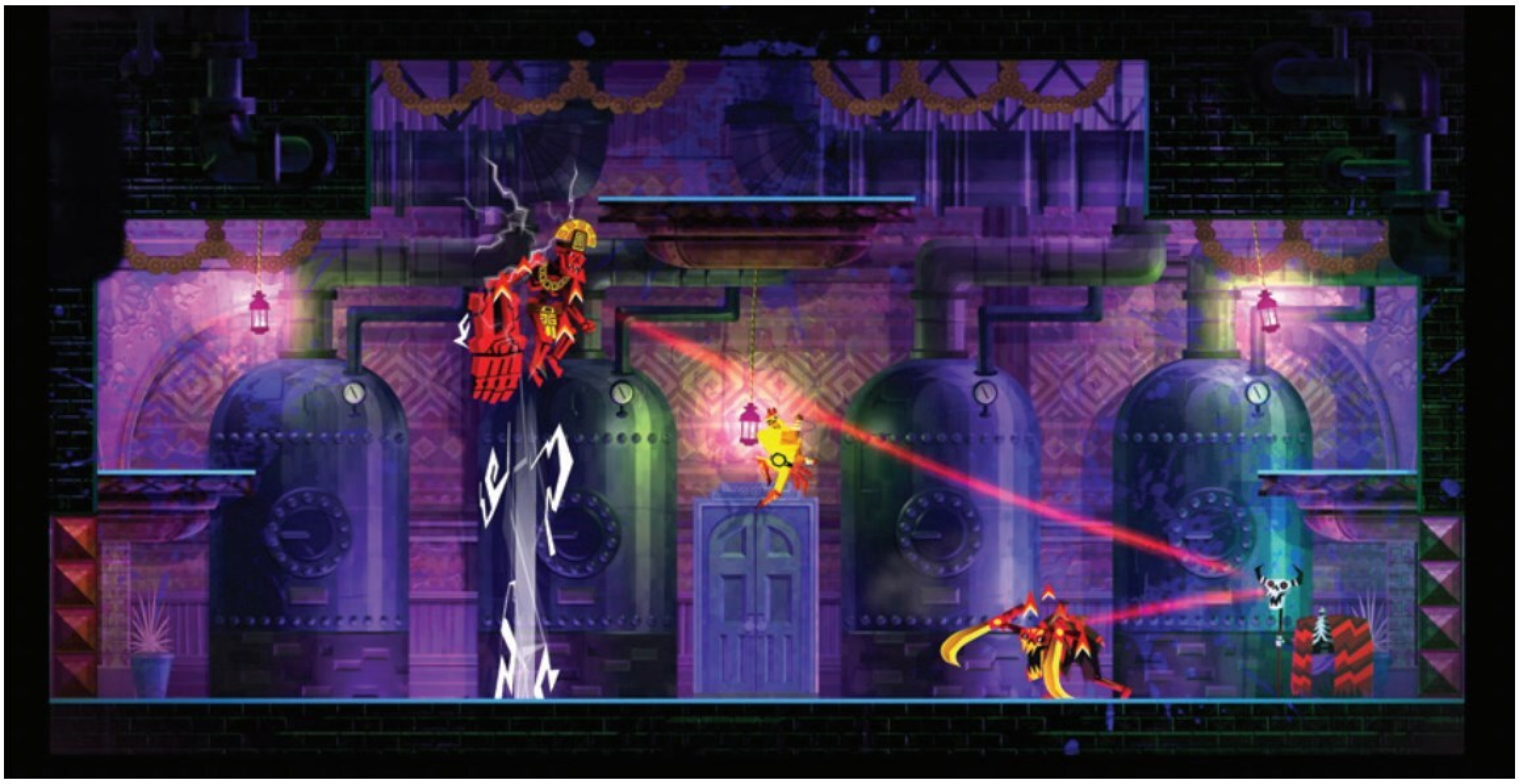
» **Graphics**
The clean, angular style and art inspired by Mexican folklore is attractive. The color palettes of the world of the living and the world of the dead are distinct, and the level of detail has improved compared to the first game

» **Sound**
The compelling mix of chiptune, flamenco guitar, and mariachi trumpet make it worth turning up the volume for the soundtrack

» **Playability**
Juan (and the other playable characters) move with impressive fluidity. The platforming and combat can get challenging, but the controls keep up

» **Entertainment**
Guacamelee 2 nails the Metroid formula while including its own style of combat and a great sense of humor

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



SNAKE DANGER

Donut County

Controlling a compelling nuisance

7.5

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Ben Esposito **Release** August 28 **Rating** E

PS4 • PC

» Concept
Take control of a mobile hole and dismantle Donut County by sending everything and everyone below ground

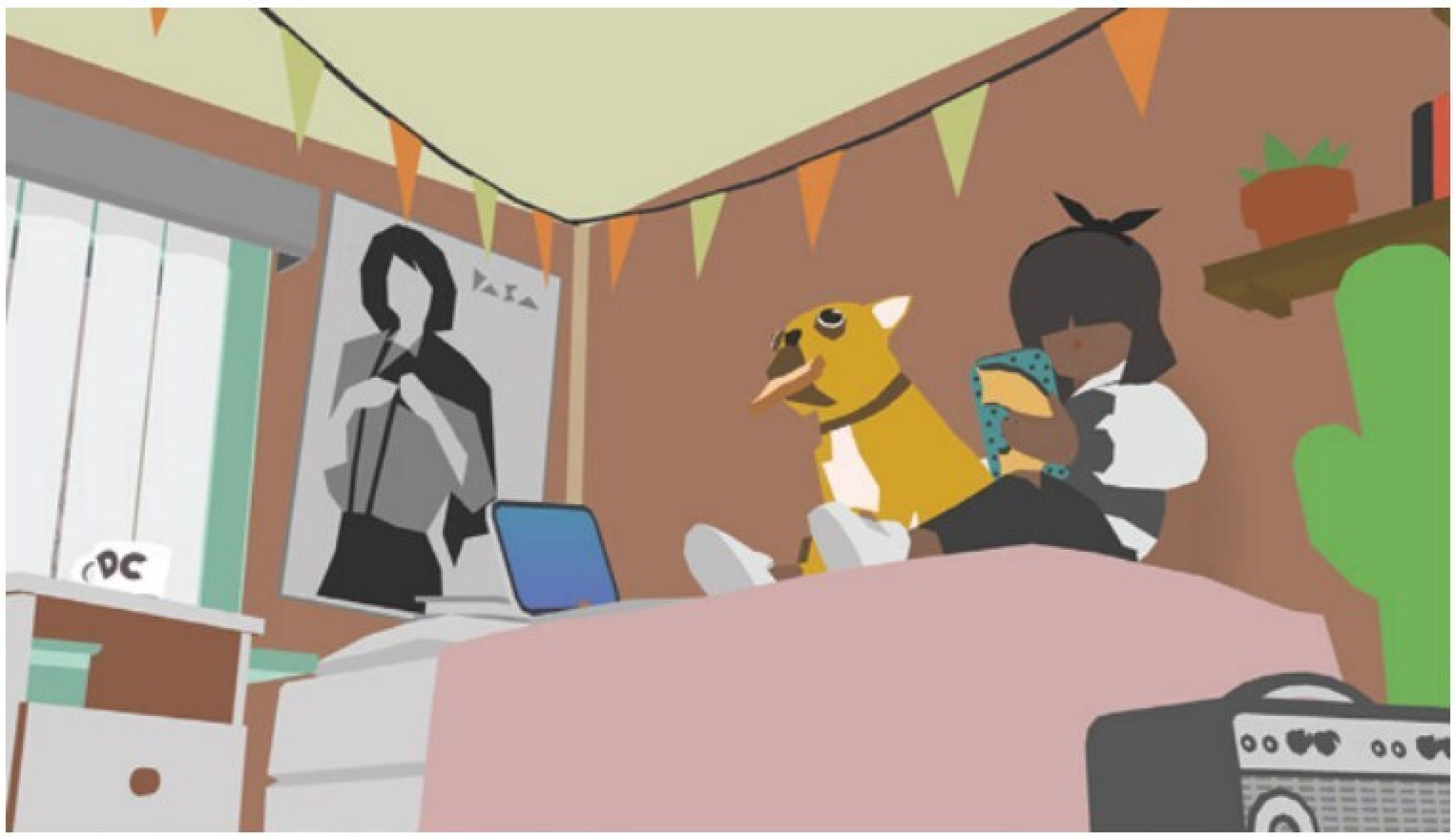
» Graphics
The simplified objects and characters are colorful and welcoming, even if they don't move much

» Sound
The soundtrack hits a relaxing and joyful tone that is pleasant to the ear

» Playability
Moving the hole along the ground is easy and responsive

» Entertainment
Donut County is as simple as it is charming, and the story conceit pulling you along is light and enjoyable

» Replay Value
Moderately low



If some strange person were to run up to you on the street and feverishly ask you to explain what an indie game is, Donut County might be the perfect example to offer that weirdo. The experience is built around a bizarre (but easy-to-understand) mechanic, and it's all wrapped up in a quirky story that you can finish in one memorable-but-strange sitting.

In Donut County, you control a hole. You move the hole along the ground, placing it below assorted objects and creatures so they fall in. As you swallow more objects, the hole gets larger, allowing you to eat up bigger objects. You may start by dropping rocks and traffic cones into your pit, but by the end of the level, you are large enough to take down entire buildings. The act of being a nuisance to the folks of Donut County by dropping their assorted possessions into the hole in order to progressively increase your ability to be obnoxious is a malicious joy. Comparisons can be drawn between Donut County and Katamari Damacy (which is about gathering junk with an ever-growing sticky ball), and though Donut County never reaches the same heights, I felt many of the same joyous emotions while playing.

Dropping things into a seemingly bottomless hole is fun on its own, but your abilities expand as you progress, opening the doors for some interesting puzzles. You learn to launch objects back out of the hole to hit switches or knock things off of shelves, and you can fill the hole with water to short electrical wires. None of the puzzles are challenging, but figuring out how to use a hole to do odd tasks like mix soup inside of it while avoiding hungry bugs offers a pleasant-but-simple sense of achievement. It also ensures that each level feels like a separate little adventure.

In tandem with the weird premise is a story with a cast of characters individually affected by the hole. Each level is flanked by a short dialogue amongst the group who are trying to escape the underground they have fallen into. The clear blame for the hole calamity belongs with BK the raccoon, who casually tries to defend himself to the angry group, leading to some funny conversations. The finale also mixes up the formula in a climactic way I won't spoil, but is fun to play and a nice resolution to the story.

Donut County is a short experience, clocking in at about two hours, but it's a lean two hours free of extraneous gameplay. I enjoyed every level, but the lack of depth means the goofy premise of sucking a town underground piece by piece doesn't feel fully explored by the end. I wanted to use the hole in larger locations and use its excellent physics to solve more complicated puzzles. Even if its ambitions are straightforward, Donut County offers a unique experience that is silly, easy to understand, and fun to play. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Overcooked 2

Another tasty bite that's easier to chew

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Team 17 **Developer** Ghost Town Games **Release** August 7 **Rating** E

When we eat at restaurants, we assume the cooks in the kitchen are working diligently to prepare meals with the proper ingredients that have not been compromised in any way. If Overcooked 2 gives us a look at what these kitchens are truly like, you may want to fill your freezer with microwave meals. In a bid to speed up the cooking process in this sequel, food is thrown with reckless abandon, and most of it ends up on the floor for at least a few seconds. If the kitchen doesn't catch fire, it's likely located in a swamp filled with toxic waste, a library overrun with ghosts, or maybe even in a graveyard with mice serving as its chefs.

Overcooked 2 delivers the same four-player cooperative madness as its predecessor, pushing players to fetch ingredients, chop them up, assemble them on a plate, and then toss them in the oven – all before a customer gets up and leaves the establishment. Little has changed between the two entries, and that's perfectly fine given just how much fun the cooking is. The big alteration isn't to something you can outright see: This installment is less frustrating, as progress is made easier thanks to more forgiving scoring and level-gating.

If your team finds a rhythm, two- and three-star ratings are fairly easy to secure in most stages. Never once did I have to return to previously completed stages just to farm more stars to unlock new levels. Hardly any of the stages delivered that sweat-inducing intensity of the first game. Rarely were we in the do-or-die position of one last dish leading to success or failure. This is both a good and bad thing, as the thrill of victory was never as large, but we also didn't hang our heads in shame after failing numerous times. The difficulty appears to be designed more for a party atmosphere, where progress is constantly made, rather than pushing players to make every last second count, and every action perfect.

That's not to say the cooking intensity has diminished. The kitchen designs and dishes that need to be whipped up are just as demanding, and push players to communicate incessantly to figure out who is doing what and which ingredients are needed to get a dish into the oven. The addition of being able to throw food either directly into the hands of another player or anywhere around them greatly speeds up the process. Some moments of failure also come from the throw maneuver, as an errant toss may send an egg directly into a dish that doesn't need it.

A typical day in the kitchen ranges from players scrambling to make two-ingredient meals like chicken and fries to the more complex pizzas that require four items. Keeping track of which orders are being worked on and which ingredients are required is where communication is key, and can frequently break down. We would sometimes accidentally add sausage to a cheese pizza or put too many bags of wheat into a mix. Some confusion also came from not knowing how to prepare dishes the first time. After fetching and chopping up a carrot, the player now needs to determine if it goes in the steamer, mixer, pan, or pot. Some kitchens feature all of the cooking options. Yes, given the lightening of the difficulty, the madness doesn't matter as much, but it's still a blast.

Being part of a group of players that are all barking orders and screaming chaos at each other is what the Overcooked series is all about. That happens again in the sequel, only you likely won't want to fry up a friend who continues screwing up, since you're still making steady progress.

Organizing play sessions is far easier now thanks to the addition of online play. As great as the couch co-op experience is, you can now play from your own home, and yes, yelling at each other still works well over the headset.

If your friends aren't around, you can enter the public space to play in randomly selected stages, or throw down in competitive play. If you like versus battles with griefing, Overcooked 2 puts it front and center. You can steal away finished dishes the other team labored on, bump into cooks to knock them off the level, and throw food at them, which they may accidentally catch and place in a dish. Like the first Overcooked, none of the modes require four players. You can cook by yourself (which requires you to switch between two cooks), but this avenue of play obviously doesn't deliver the same level of insanity.

The Overcooked series is similar to that restaurant that made a name for itself with one signature dish. Not much has changed between the original game and the sequel, but the recipe has been honed to reduce frustration and make it easier to chew. » **Andrew Reiner**

8

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Frantic cooperative cooking that improves on the original with relaxed gating and scoring systems that make it easier to advance

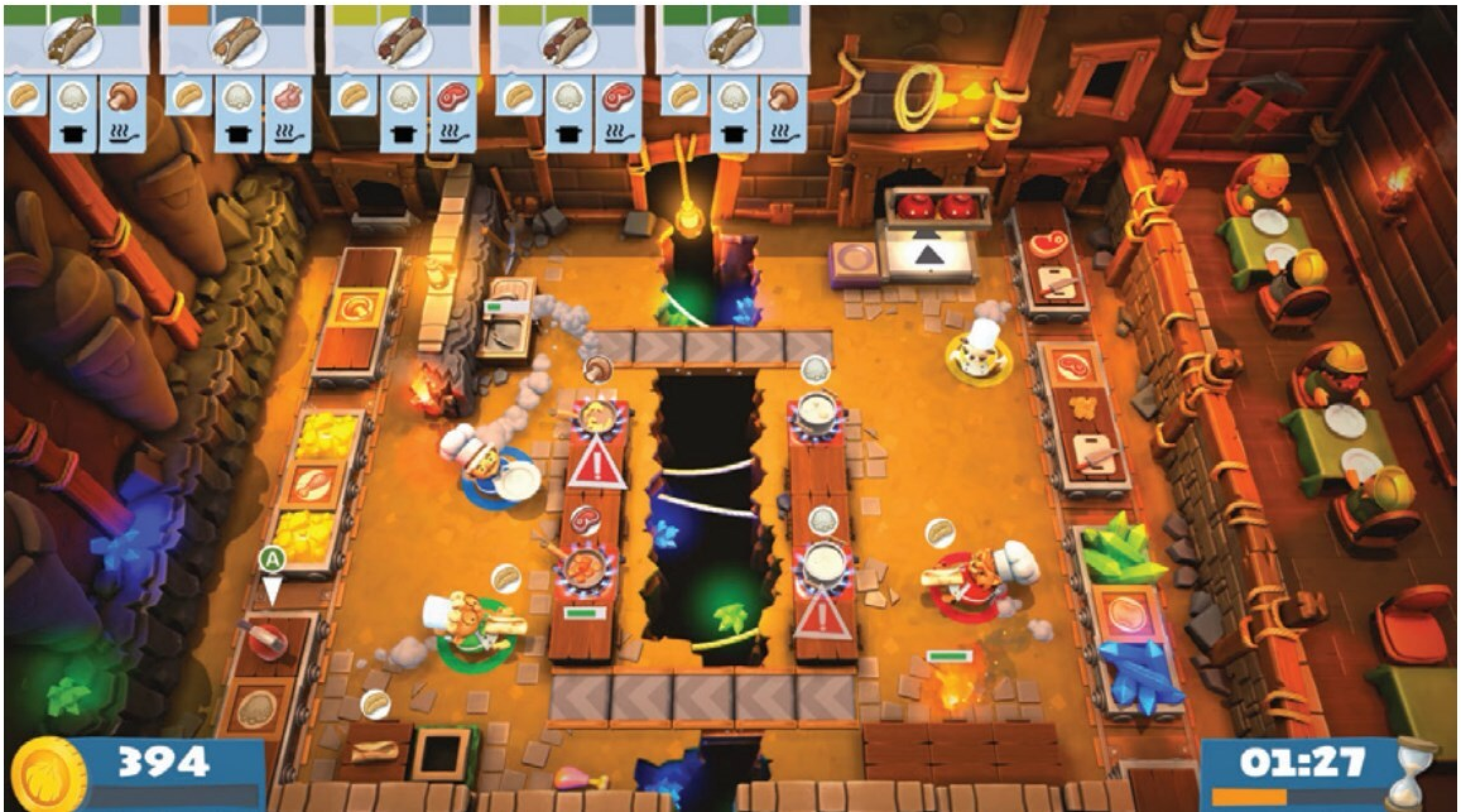
» Graphics
Level designs are quite clever. Ingredients pop off of the screen, but item requirement menus can be difficult to read when they overlap

» Sound
An excellent score offers soothing melodies that match the environments and calm the nerves initially, but turn frenzied when the clock ticks down

» Playability
Controls work flawlessly for any action, and the throw maneuver adds a nice element of strategy to the already-great gameplay package. Stages are sometimes designed with this move in mind, which both aids and hurts player efforts

» Entertainment
With the eased restrictions on making progress, Overcooked 2 is designed for a party atmosphere rather than the first game's nail-biting need for perfection

» Replay Value
Moderately high



Yakuza Kiwami 2

Leader of the pack

9

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega **Release** August 28 **Rating** M

PS4

» Concept
Help Kazuma Kiryu put up his dukes once again as a shadowy, violent group looks to take over his turf

» Graphics
From facial textures and animations to the visual design of the environment, Kiwami 2 is a gorgeous game

» Sound
The genre-hopping soundtrack features nu metal and jazz, and it sounds fantastic

» Playability
Even if this is your first Yakuza, the combat system is easy to understand, but difficult to master

» Entertainment
Kiwami 2 is more than a great remake: it's the best this strange, wonderful series has to offer and it shouldn't be missed by fans of action or RPG titles

» Replay Value
High

Poor Kazuma Kiryu. Everybody's favorite Japanese gangster with a heart of gold just can't catch a break. A year after the explosive and tragic events of the previous game, this second entry finds him and his adopted daughter Haruka spending their days in melancholy peace. A violent clan dispute brings a retired Kiryu back into the fold to help settle things between the crime families in Kamurocho. However, events rapidly spiral out of control and our hero must confront a massive, looming threat the only way he knows how: with his fists. Kiwami 2, a remake of Yakuza 2, uses the standout elements of its predecessors while cutting away most of the flaws to create the best Yakuza game yet.

The central story of Kiwami 2 is fantastic. This series' games can often feel like you're navigating a flow chart as you piece together the relationships between the crime families, understand Kiryu's connections to them, and also keep up with the breakneck pace of the storytelling. However, this entry throws most of the convolutedness to the wayside, focusing instead on an epic grudge match between Kiryu and new nemesis Ryuji Godo, a walking tower of muscle and fury.

Dismissing Ryuji as a big idiot is easy at first, but he clearly has more going on inside his head than he lets on. His backstory unfolds to reveal a surprisingly deep character with sympathetic motivations, to the point that you might occasionally root for him. The clashes between Ryuji and Kiryu are always enthralling, whether they're throwing punches or veiled insults and threats.

Combat has been overhauled, with more combos to let you deal out devastation

By focusing on that relationship and the tragic backstories of its characters, Kiwami 2 emphasizes the thematic elements that make this series so appealing: honor among criminals, the importance of identity in our fate, and facing consequences for our actions.

An awe-inspiring injection of new content provides plenty of things to do when you're not following the main storyline. Alongside new activities, some old favorites return imbued with new life. The cabaret club mode, which has you managing hostesses in a competition with other clubs around the city to see who can bring in the most cash, hides an in-depth tale filled with fantastic character development, a fun challenge, and some glorious payoff for series fans. Another lengthy sidequest has you helping fan-favorite Goro Majima fend off mobsters attacking his housing projects. This is an entertaining strategy game diversion when you need a break from brawling in the streets.

In addition to the aforementioned expanded content, there's also The Truth of Goro Majima, which is a campaign set between Kiwami and Kiwami 2 where you get to play Majima and stick his knife in a bunch of people. This devilish jaunt serves as an epilogue to Majima's story in Yakuza 0, answering a number of lingering questions about him and a certain other character, and is absolutely worth playing for fans of Yakuza 0.

Equally engrossing as the new modes and quests are the myriad tweaks Kiwami 2 brings to the combat and leveling systems. It solves some issues with previous installments by packing environments with everyday objects like bikes and beer cans, giving you plenty of methods to break foes' heads in. New combat moves feature brutal animations, and even allow you to call in backup from NPCs you help in side quests.

All of these tweaks and additions result in a game that's consistently fun. I fought over a thousand enemies during my 35 hours with Kiwami 2, and every encounter was enjoyable thanks to the steady drip of combat-related unlocks and a growing sense of power.

Outside of combat, the pacing is also much improved over previous games, which had a habit of locking you up for hours with story missions before letting you out to play with the open-world activities. With Kiwami 2, you get a break between nearly every chapter, giving you more freedom to do what you want when you want.

In a time where the expectation of the video game remake is constantly changing, Kiwami 2 proves to be one of the best ones out there by imbuing its systems with new life and adding a ridiculous amount of compelling content. It speaks to the strength of both Kiwami 2 and Yakuza as a whole that despite spending endless hours in Kamurocho, I can't wait for the next opportunity to return and backhand some delinquent scum through the glass window of a convenience store.

» Javy Gwaltney

World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth

Successfully landing on stormy shores

gameinformer SILVER

Style MMORPG **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** August 13 **Rating** T

8.75

PC • Mac

The last World of Warcraft expansion, Legion, played with huge stakes in terms of player advancement and changes to systems and mechanics. Battle for Azeroth stands in its shadow in some respects, gently finessing some of those systems and providing a wealth of content, but dialing back the wow factor of acquiring legendary artifact weapons and unleashing them on the Burning Legion. Battle for Azeroth is a subtler ride, focusing more on impressive new environments and cool characters than sweeping transformation.

World quests, artifact power, and much of the excellent endgame fare introduced in Legion is back, though progression outside of leveling is now a bit different. Instead of powering up a single item in a somewhat linear fashion, artifact power now charges up several different gear slots - and you are always on the lookout for items to drop to fill these instead of a singular static piece. Each of these pieces has different choices to make in terms of how to use your artifact power, so it keeps the desire strong to keep finding new loot. While the effects are dialed back compared to the flashy powers on artifact weapons, I greatly enjoy the fact that I'm constantly making choices and collecting pieces. That said, with no new abilities or talents on the way to level 120 from 110 and the lack of exciting artifact traits, my character doesn't feel much different now than it did years ago.

The two new island continents are great zones to explore, with a variety of biomes and experiences, capitalizing on themes of seafaring, pirates, old gods, and dinosaurs. It's an ambitious, almost zany fantasy fusion that somehow works. Players face a constant barrage of additional things to do as they knock out traditional quests, like tracking down chests and rare monsters. The trail of breadcrumbs from activity to activity is engaging and keeps interest high as you move between objectives.

New zones are at their best on the Horde side. Your first visit to Zuldazar is breathtaking; it's a massive capital city that makes Dalaran, Orgimmar, and Stormwind look pedestrian. The island is dotted with thematic and fun experiences, many of them involving blood trolls, loa, or a lot of awesome dinosaurs. It is also home to great new characters like the dark-deal-making Bwonsamdi. The island and its inhabitants take clear inspiration from Haitian Voodoo, but the colorful World of Warcraft slant is surprisingly effective, and kept me interested through the leveling journey.

The quality of dungeon content is all over the place. Waycrest Manor is the high note, as players explore a haunted house full of strange denizens and wafting organ notes coming up from the basement below. It feels almost like an old-school, mini-Karazhan – a spooky place with solid variety in encounters and nice pacing. On the other end of the spectrum are dungeons like The Motherlode, which is a long and uninspired corridor with a seemingly endless pile of trash monsters to wade through.

In addition to traditional dungeons, island expeditions are randomized three-person scenarios that don't require any specific group composition to tackle. These can be completed as bite-sized content for an artifact power boost; players get a bit of it for each run, but get a huge influx for completing enough each week. I love the variance of the different expeditions here. Your opponents are different each time, and factor into how you have to engage. You may face a more passive team looking to get points by killing monsters, or you may run into the Worgen band that tracks you down and attempts to kill you over and over. Changing up your strategy based on what you find is great fun, but the rewards don't really merit engaging after you've hit your weekly payload. You can also play this mode in PvP mode against actual other players, which can add yet another layer of strategy to the battle and you'll get some additional rewards, but I prefer to go up against the interesting preconstructed PvE compositions. Just not those Worgen. They'll never stop hunting you!

And what of the war? As you progress, you slowly unlock new footholds in enemy territory. Some of this is reputation-gated, so it's difficult to make headway at first, but it's a clever way to drip out new outposts in "hostile" lands. Truth be told, unless you have war mode enabled (consensual PvP), most of the time spent in enemy territory outside of specific missions doesn't feel very warlike and feels like more of the same stuff you're doing on allied ground. Despite the highly questionable lead up into the war spurred by Sylvanas, I'm more than happy to mess with Alliance holdings under the command of her champion Nathanos Blightcaller, who adds a little spark and spice to each deed done in the name of the Horde.

Living up to the standard set by Legion, one of World of Warcraft's best expansions ever, is an almost impossible task. Battle for Azeroth isn't quite there yet. With warfronts, raids, and more story beats coming in the future, that may change. For now, the only thing for certain is that World of Warcraft still captures the MMORPG magic. And now that magic has dinosaurs.

» Daniel Tack

» Concept
Explore new islands as old rivalries bring the Horde and Alliance into an all-out war

» Graphics
Inspired zones and environments prove that WoW can still convey interesting ideas despite its age

» Sound
A stirring score highlights dungeon delves, the majesty of capital cities, and the march to war

» Playability
Starting fresh in WoW is a daunting task, even with the extensive amount of streamlining and accessibility options over the last few years. But breadcrumbs do a solid job of leading players to critical elements

» Entertainment
It may not break new ground in comparison to the preceding expansion, but Battle for Azeroth provides a wealth of activities for players to enjoy and experience

» Replay Value
High

8.75 F1 2018

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release August 24 **Rating** E

Racing games are all about strapping yourself in behind the wheel and chasing that checkered flag, but you can't forget all the hard work put in just to get you to the start/finish line in the first place. F1 2018's excellent career mode skillfully lets you enjoy the fruits of both labors. *– Matthew Kato*

8 WarioWare Gold

Platform 3DS **Release** August 3
Rating E10+

WarioWare has always been strange and joyous, and WarioWare Gold rounds-up the best from its history while delivering enough new microgames to feel like a new installment. *– Kyle Hilliard*

5 Little Dragons Café

Platform PS4, Switch **Release** August 24 **Rating** E10+

When you see a lemonade stand, you might stop because it's cute and you want to be supportive. If you want a top-notch drink, however, it's best to keep walking. That same approach applies to Little Dragons Café, a game about an enthusiastic tot running a restaurant. Like those lemonade stands, good intentions can't change this lukewarm sugar-water into something satisfying. *– Jeff Cork*

9.25 Monster Hunter: World

Platform PC **Release** August 9 **Rating** T

Monster Hunter: World's PC version provides the same great hunting and gathering loops console players dove into earlier this year. After having not played the series until now I'm absolutely hooked, both on the series and how PC enhances the experience. *– Suriel Vazquez*

8 Phantom Doctrine

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** August 14 **Rating** M

In some ways, Phantom Doctrine is what you make of it. The sheer depth and lack of guidance allow you to focus on the systems you enjoy while ignoring other systems completely, sometimes to your own detriment. *– Jeff Marchiafava*

7 Danger Zone 2

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** July 13 **Rating** E10+

The reliance on a mixture of randomness and carefully orchestrated set pieces is definitely part of its charm, but the predominance of randomness only exacerbates the sense of shallowness and lack of thrills that go beyond an ephemeral dopamine hit. *– Matthew Kato*

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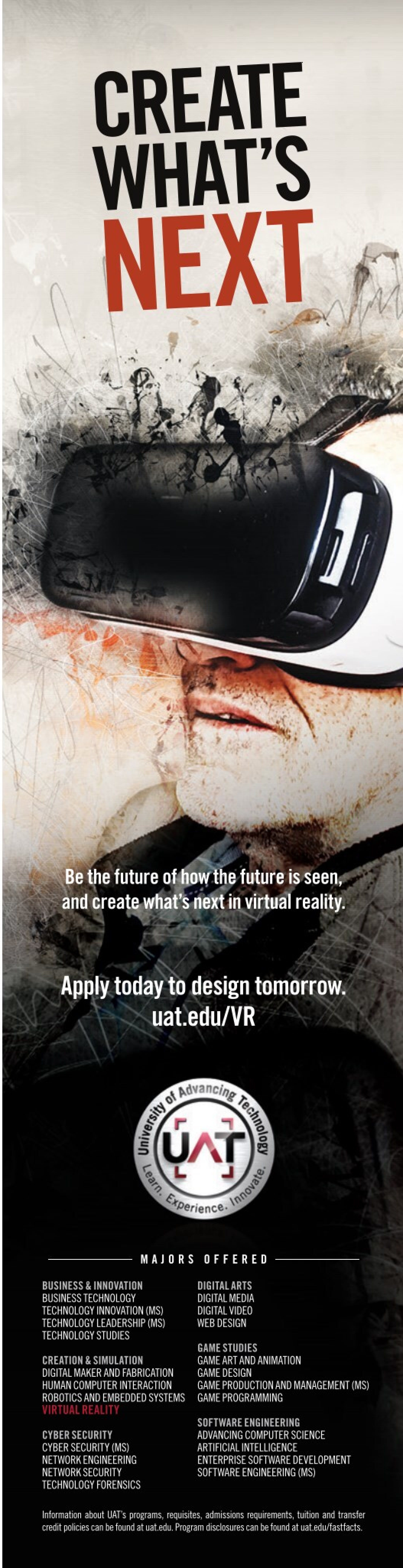

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CASTING CALL OF DUTY

Match the actor to the Call of Duty you forgot they were in

Call of Duty boasts some of the most impressive acting talent of any video game series, but it's rare that it uses Hollywood stars as a major selling point in its advertising. These actors mostly appear as fun cameos in the multiplayer, or sneak into cutscenes to yell a few lines of dialogue before it's time to move onto the next shooting gallery. Let's see if you can remember who appeared in which Call of Duty.

by Kyle Hilliard

1. Heather Graham _____
2. Idris Elba _____
3. Jason Statham _____
4. Katheryn Winnick _____
5. Keith David _____
6. Kiefer Sutherland _____
7. Mark Hamill _____
8. Michael Keaton _____
9. Paul Reubens _____
10. Sarah Michelle Gellar _____

A. Call of Duty
B. Call of Duty 2
C. Call of Duty: World at War
D. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
E. Call of Duty: Black Ops
F. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
G. Call of Duty: Black Ops II
H. Call of Duty: Black Ops III
I. Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare
J. Call of Duty: WWII

Answers 1:H, 2:F, 3:A, 4:J, 5:D, 6:C, 7:B, 8:G, 9:I, 10:E

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